The Paris Review

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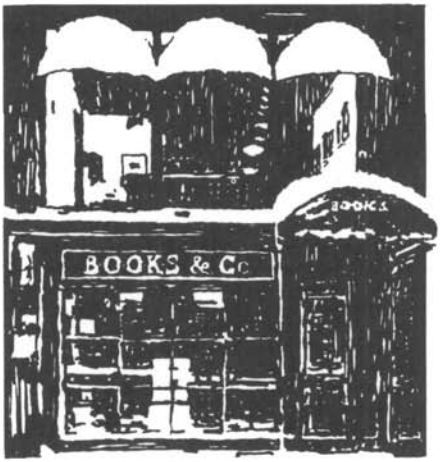

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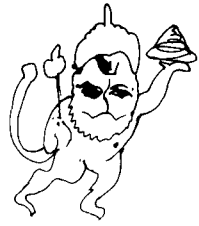

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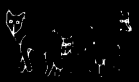

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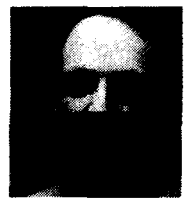

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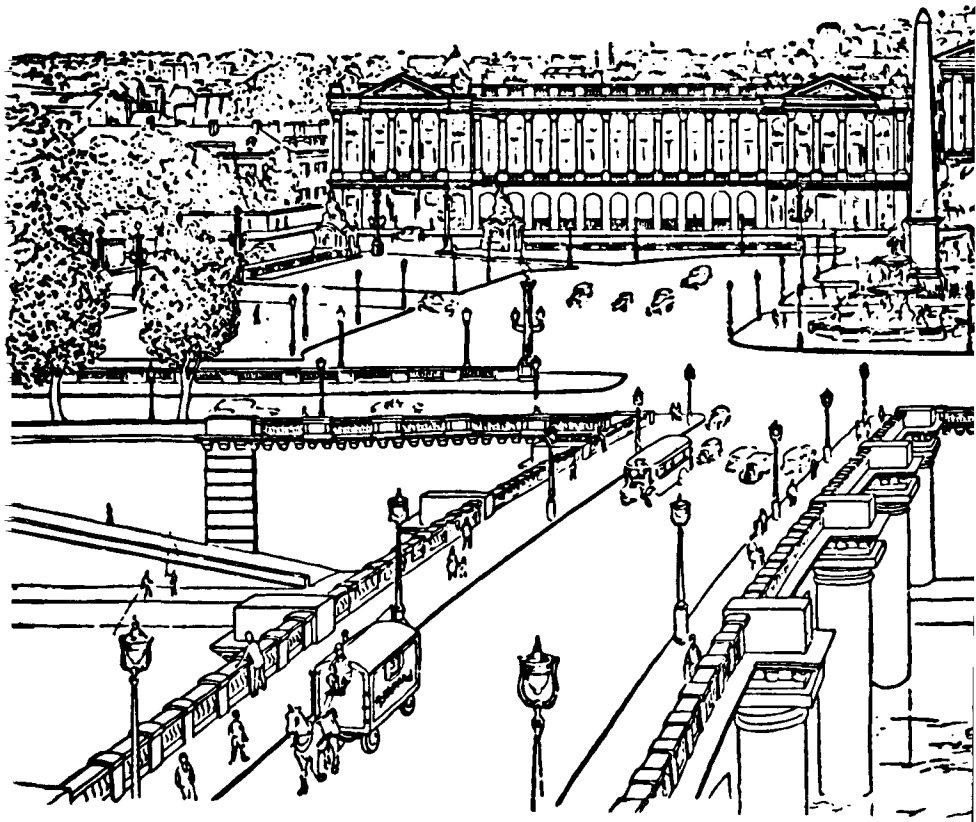

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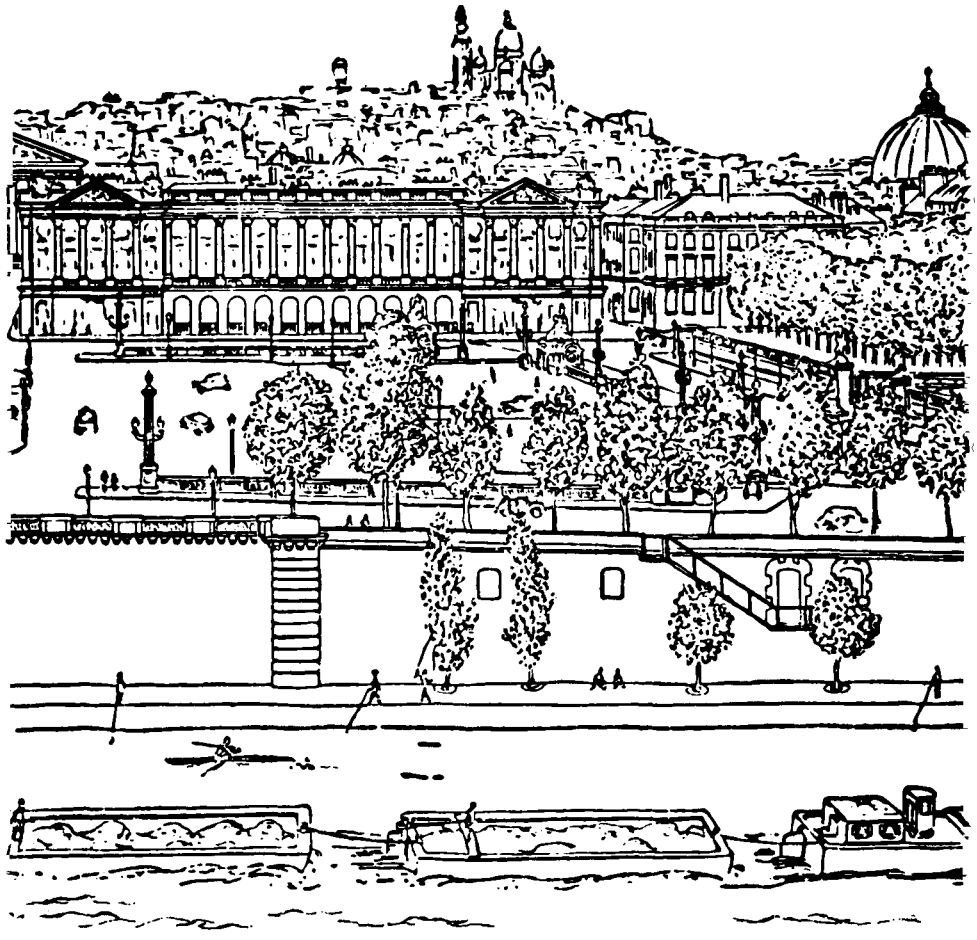

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Balancing Water

William Kittredge

Sharon understands the uses of beautiful. When she comes to visit, even in this middle life, she wears her hair down and schoolgirl thick to her shoulders.

I think of her walking the streets of Seattle in her high heels, carrying a little black umbrella and going to lunch with the rich women, like you suppose they do, while men watch. I wonder if she piles her hair up and shows the back of her neck.

"Don't get too many ideas," she says, and that's a way of joking. It wasn't me that got us started.

Once I was the hired boy, and her mother sent me to drive Sharon through the open snowfields to the schoolhouse over on Two Dot Creek with the sun coming up onto the peaks of the Crazy Mountains. Sharon was nothing but a cold bare-legged little girl, but I sat warm in her mother's Chrysler and watched her red hair bloom with the sunlight that bright winter morning. She looked back and saw me looking, and she still brushes her hair at night like that schoolgirl.

Which makes me happy to think about.

"Balancing water," I say, and Sharon laughs. It's another old joke. Don't imagine I am dumb enough to think love is like

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water, except in the way everything is like water, always seeking to fill its level.

"Too bad Turkey couldn't come," Sharon said. "He loves it out here." That was bullshit. Turkey didn't love it at all. Sharon was talking about her husband, a Chinese man named Tony Lee, called Turkey by his friends, who are everywhere once you get beyond Montana. Turkey is a tall, smiling man with immaculate eyeglasses, a tough-headed guy who specializes in friends, and a chess master who flies out of Seattle to play month-long matches in Taiwan and Egypt.

Sharon and I were on the lawn in front of the house where she lived when she was the girl I watched, the creaking frame country house I keep painted so white now that it is mine to live in. The sun was only up a half hour, and the bunkhouse hands were gone to the Fourth of July in Billings. Out beyond the corrals a thousand yellow butterflies were flickering through the wheatgrass.

Sharon sipped her Bloody Mary from my marmalade jar. The only glasses I keep these days are marmalade and peanut-butter jars. I eat off paper plates when I don't eat down at the bunkhouse. On the built-in breakfront in the dining room I keep a stack of paper plates about three feet high.

"Poor old Turkey," Sharon said, and that was more bullshit. There is nothing to pity about Turkey. You had to know he was a hard nut the first time I met him, the spring Sharon was a junior at the University in Missoula. They'd driven off to Reno in his Studebaker, and got themselves married, and it was a goddamned scandal in our part of the world.

"Couldn't you get a white man?" her father said, which was mainly a way for him to break his own heart on Sharon, no matter how strong his feelings. Sharon and Turkey had just come east of the mountains for family introductions, over the Rock Mountains, as Lewis and Clark called them, and east through White Sulfur Springs to the low pass where you see the Great Plains make their endless start, and down along the Musselshell.

In those days I hung my coat and my hat alongside my

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snaffle-bit bridle and wooly shotgun chaps and spare shirts on a line of nails driven into the wall of a room in that bunkhouse the old drovers built of cottonwood logs when they first brought cattle north from Texas, and I slept there on a steel-framed cot, right at the heart of things where in summertime I could prop open the windows and smell the corrals after thunder and a rain, and go to sleep listening to the horses as they clomped back and forth through the creek water like they will, on their way to some nighttime foraging or another. There are summer nights when the bunkhouse is empty and I still go down there to sleep.

Even in those days I was considered family enough, and welcome in the kitchen door any time I wanted, day or night. It was the afternoon before New Year's and the Christmas tree lights were still plugged in and blinking beside the fireplace Sharon's grandfather had built of riverstones. Sharon stood her ground, and Turkey just sat there without flinching and smiled through those eyeglasses, and you could see he was every bit as tough as Bert Doran.

"Shit," Sharon said, and she grinned. "The Chinese invented gunpowder." If that was supposed to be a joke, it didn't work. You had to know Bert Doran. He never smiled at all.

"Not that boy," he said.

Right there Sharon called for Turkey to come with her, and they drove off in his gray-colored Studebaker, and not even Sharon ever came back while Bert was alive. Bert Doran was an oil field roughneck come north out of Wyoming and reformed into marriage, and it was his luck to work himself to death just about the time he joined the Masonic Shrine down in Billings and discovered the life he'd been expecting to enjoy. Sharon's mother owned the property and that was a lot of Bert's problem. For a while after she died and Sharon got the deeds I had the same kind of problem, but now we have found a floor under things.

Tony Lee is an engineer for Boeing in Seattle, and Sharon lives with him in one of those big old restored three-generation houses out on the cliff above the Puget Sound in Ballard, when he isn't off in Egypt or somewhere playing his

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chess. Which is where he was that morning, I guess, somewhere. And I have spent my life seeing after Sharon's acreage and her enterprises in Montana.

"You can't trust them," Sharon said, and she swirled her drink with her forefinger, and sucked it dry. The meadows out below us were greened-up with swamp grass and the willow was in fresh leaf along the sloughs. My feelings for such mornings have cost me real money. Without them I'd be living somewhere else, on my own property. I like to live at an edge of the world where I know the stories behind the names of places, and where most of the stories are about people who lived here just before me, and haven't been dead very long. Lewis and Clark named the Musselshell, and even they are not so long ago.

"Foreigners," Sharon said, and you had to know she was talking about Turkey. One time right after she inherited the deeds from her mother, when she was drunk and telling stories on Turkey, Sharon proposed calling this place "The Japan Ranch." I made real sure none of the neighbors heard about that one, because it was a name they would have laughed about and liked. If it had stuck I couldn't have lived here anymore. Nobody wants to live in the middle of a joke.

Sharon sat her drink glass down on the lawn grass, carefully so as to not spill, and she lit a Lucky Strike, same as Bert had smoked. This was always a sign. I don't think she smokes any cigarettes in Seattle.

"Turkey is whoring on me," she said. "He has for years."

"He loves to drink in Trader Vic's," she said. "Isn't that a kick in the ass?"

I just kept my silence.

"Did you whore on her?" Sharon said. She was talking about the woman who was my wife the second year I was home from the Air Force on Guam. Becky, we all called her Beck, who has been gone to California this long time now. Sharon was looking at me with the gray steady gaze of someone solving problems.

And I looked away. Sharon seemed like a city woman in her

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stiff button-up Levis and the old flannel shirt she had raided out of my closet. A city woman playing at schoolgirl. Sharon had showed up right after daybreak, saying she had driven the night from Seattle and wanted a drink. She said Turkey didn't own any flannel shirts, and she took the shirt she wanted right out of my closet. And now she was talking about whoring around.

"Yeah," I said. "I suppose."

"Good morning," she said. She picked up her glass off the lawn, real careful, and walked out to stand by one of the old poplar trees at the edge of the lawn, picking at the bark with her fingernails.

"You know," she said. "I never liked her."

"She wanted to stay," I said. It was a lie.

"Not really," Sharon said. "Not ever, really."

"How would you know?" It was a decent question. Sharon had only seen Beck twice in the flesh.

"It's the sort of thing you know. I could have stayed. But she never could stand it. I could tell. She couldn't stand it out here. Right from the first summer I knew she was gone, she was good as history." Sharon held her drink out to the sun like she was toasting somebody. "But for me this could have been home, easy as not."

"You're out of drink," I said.

"You remember shooting quail?" she said, and of course I remembered shooting quail from the greasewood in the horse pasture, fluttering hundreds of them rising from the brush, and I remember killing maybe a dozen with #7 shot as I fired Bert's fine-etched Belgian 12 gauge into the thick coveys on the ground. Her mother skinned them quickly, never bothering to pluck the feathers from such tiny fragile creatures. Her mother cooked only the breasts in pale thick gravy.

"She could never stand it," Sharon said. She was still talking about Beck.

"She stood it," I said, and I remembered early mornings upstream on the creek, where it comes out of the Crazy Mountains, and Beck barelegged in the cold water, unhooking the small flipping trout I caught while the mist burned off. Beck

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who is my dark-eyed lost girl, who would have been my wife for all these years. "She wanted to stay," I said, and it was the same lie.

"Another drink would be nice," Sharon said. "Then I'll cook your breakfast. I'll be your girl."

We had steak and eggs on my paper plates, and we ate on the oak dining-room table that was her mother's, the only substantial furniture left from the old days. Sharon's mother had polished that table with care I never understood until lately. I haven't bought much other furniture. Some chairs and a microwave oven and a queen-sized bed, and in the living room I've got a pool table I bought from Ernie Brier after he went broke in his Harlowtown tavern. Sometimes I shoot pool and drink beer all night long. I can shoot a decent enough game of eight ball.

"I guess I was jealous," Sharon said. "This is the place I should have lived. She had my house."

"I always wanted, years ago," she said, "for you to get in my bed when you thought I was sleeping."

"Sometimes yet," she said, "when Turkey's out at night, I lay in bed and I think about it. I thought of it just now when we were out on the lawn. I thought I could live here and it would be all right. And it would."

"Yeah," I said, and I mixed us some more of the vodka and tomato juice.

"You know what I did?" she said. "I whored. One time I whored."

"Never mind who," she said. "We went to Trader Vic's and we drank, and then we went upstairs in the hotel and we screwed. We did it in a hotel room. Upstairs from Trader Vic's. And you know what? One time I whored and listen to this." Her gray eyes were not so steady anymore.

"There was a fire," she said, "we're on the nineteenth floor, and there's a fire."

She chewed a last piece of steak. "I could hear sirens," she said, "and I'm bare-assed naked. Down below there's a fire, and you know it made me happy. I mean like I was a little girl

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and there was something I always wanted to happen and it was happening, like a game and I was in a movie watching, and it was real, little red trucks and hoses and people running around in the street."

"It was a hotel," she said, "down the hill a couple of blocks from our hotel. The Hotel Winslow. I don't forget it. Twenty-six dead in the paper that morning." She was staring out the window and just telling her story, like she had all the words learned by heart.

"I looked at the pictures a long time. There was a fireman climbing a steel ladder. The windows up above him were seeping smoke, like spirits were getting away. That's what I think now. Does that sound stupid? The curtains were afire. There was a list of names. I got one of them to memory just for the sake of remembering. It was Jacob Crashaw, aged 63, Deloria, Missouri. Who the hell could that be? Somebody named Jake, he lives sixty-three years, and comes all the way from Missouri to some down-and-outer hotel in Seattle so he can burn up in my movie.

"It was like it wasn't my real life," she said, "the flames were going up hundreds of feet, and then my Italian comes up behind me in the room and puts his arms around me and holds one of my breasts in each hand, and rubs his hard cock against the backs of my legs, and I hated him. Come over here he said. He pulled the drapes and I hated the son of a bitch.

"I tried to break the window," she said. "I tried to break the hotel window with an ashtray. Can you imagine me jumping? Nineteen floors?"

And I could, I could imagine her falling.

"I could have jumped," Sharon said. "If that glass would have broke. I thought about it later, and I knew right then I could have jumped." Sharon and I were in my living room while she told this story, knocking balls around on the pool table, and into the second bottle of vodka.

"I stayed the rest of the night with him," she said. "I was afraid of the elevator.

"I was sick," she said, "and he held my head, and I felt like my eyes were crossed.

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"Do something for me," she said, and then she began unbuttoning her Levis. Her underpants were pink behind the tails of my flannel shirt. "Sit down," she said, and she patted the edge of the pool table. Then she kicked off her sandals, and shucked out of her pants, leaving them wadded there on the floor.

"Just sit down," she said. Her legs were soft white, and thicker than I had imagined.

She took my hand and her fingers were cold as she folded mine to the cool flesh at the inside of her thigh. "Just hold me," she said. "Just there. That's all I ever wanted." My fingers felt like sticks.

"There's nothing wrong with this," she said. "I figured that out." She began unbuttoning the shirt and she was naked underneath as she dropped it off. I had not understood that her breasts were so small.

She took the lobe of my ear between her fingers and she leaned back away from me and pinched, and I sat quiet with my eyes watering, looking away from her to the scuffed hardwood floor her mother had kept so polished, and wondering if this was a contest. "Just move and I'll stop," she said.

I closed my eyes and she let go.

"It's too bad this is what happened," she said, and when I opened my eyes there were tears running down her face, her eyes wet with her strangeness, and no one could have seen what she thought or wanted.

She lifted my hand from her thigh and stood from the pool table. My hand was damp when I clenched my fist. "You and the Chinaman," she said.

"Not me," I said.

"Close enough," she said.

"Horseshit," she said. "I can't do anything about it—*Not me.*" She was mimicking my voice.

"Nineteen floors," she said. "I could have fallen like a bird." I saw her falling, the glass shattering and Sharon pitching herself out into the air.

"Come here," she said.

And I did, I touched her breasts as gently as I could, but

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they were cold. I traced my fingers to her nipples and she caught her breath like an actress.

"Hold me," she said. But I just dropped my hands to my sides.

Sharon touched her cheek, like her mother would do. "All right," she said. "Now act right." She began unbuttoning my shirt.

In my bedroom the patterns of light from the small-paned windows were yellow and still on the far wall and the dusty hardwood floor, and I lay beside her in the noontime warmth across my old flannel sheets. Her body was glowing white as she sucked at my nipples like she had found something, her arms around me, pulling me up to her mouth. Then she gave it up, and rolled back to look me over. "It doesn't mean a thing to you," she said, "does it?"

But then she smiled. "Jesus," she said, "but we're alone in here."

"I wanted to do something wrong," Sharon said, "and you're it." She lay back and lifted her arms above her head as if trying to surrender to something. She closed her eyes and looked serious and seemed to be waiting.

At least she was warm now, those breasts tight as a child's as I kissed them. Once in a while there are times just before sleep when I can bring the darkness behind my eyelids to come bright with a morning sky and waterbirds in their flyways, going north. Out back of the house when we were children Sharon and I would circle our running ways through the groves of wild plum with their heavy fruit, and the blue flies and yellowjackets would seem to burn the air with their sounds. I could hear that burning in my ears.

Sharon dug her fingers into the hair on my chest, and she took hold of me and I was ready as a creature can always be ready. But right there came the moment when I would not do it. I listened to small birds rustle in the lilac outside, and closed my eyes and saw bright dust floating in the sunlight behind them.

"All right," Sharon said, and her voice was thick and caught, and I opened my eyes and since then I am not sorry for any-

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thing. She caught me looking as she rested there ready for me with her hands thrown back above her head, studying me and biting at the top of her tongue and looking close to laughing. I leaned forward and stared down into her dry gray eyes where nothing was happy, and pinned her wrists as she raised those heavy white legs up around me. But it wouldn't work and I had to reach down and start myself into her perfect slipperiness as she sucked long breaths through her teeth.

She hadn't been fucking anybody much, for a long time, you could tell, because she was tight and too eager. For a thought I worried if this was a way women could do themselves damage.

"Goddamn," Sharon said when we lay back, and her eyes were glowing with whatever she thought, and she was still strange to me as I came back to myself. "I think about you," she said. "You never owned anything, and I own all of this."

You find what fits, and you make your deals. That's what Bert Doran used to say. But you got to want it, Bert would say, like a dog wants his bone, and if you do, who cares how they work you?

The fields are blooming with wild lilies, and I'm not going anywhere. But there was something I had to know. I have never in my life owned a quarter inch of earth, and I was still capable of believing I didn't live anywhere if I didn't own the place I lived. That feeling took a long time to shake. Last February I went on a drive for myself, south out of this snow country.

In Las Vegas I ran a hard-way six into eight hundred dollars of profit and I kept on driving beyond Hoover Dam like a rich man. I subscribe to *National Geographic Magazine* and I wanted to see some things. So I looked at the Grand Canyon and the Hopi Indians and it was like postcards and then some Indians.

But finally I got out of the pickup and worked my way down a mile or so into the redrock canyon where they have preserved a prehistoric place called The White House. I waded the shallow twist of a wide creek three times to get there. Everybody this side of civilization has seen the pictures, the cluster of na-

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tive mud brick jammed in up there onto a shelf under that great cliff. Those old people picked to live in a place that could only be reached by long ladders, and there hadn't been any ladders for centuries. The huge slick-faced rise of water-stained red and orange rock above it was as much alive as the soft little wind blowing down through the willow and Russian olive where I stood on muddy ground at the bottom. The moaning of the air sounded like get out of here, this isn't yours, not for even this minute, and them old Indians still owned it in their way. There is nothing to own but what you do. We like to think it comes down to money and deeds to the property, but nothing ever does, except for fools.

On summer mornings before sunup I would catch my pinto horse—he was half Shetland and half Morgan and as quick a little horse as I have ever owned—and I would gallop down the gravel roads and out into the chill air across the meadows toward the hay camp in the Cameron Field where the haystacking crew was living in their tents alongside the round willow corral.

The cook fire would be lifting smoke and a few early risers would be sloshing their faces in water from the artesian well and edging in toward the coffee. In mist that rose from the meadows as the sun cleared the Sagehen Ridge I would circle after our great Belgian work teams, fifty or so lumbering beauties, their hooves thumping the dry sod as I herded them along, and then I would climb down off my little horse and act like I was a grown man in front of Bert Doran.

Say what you will about Bert, he died of an overworked heart in his middle age. When the teams were harnessed and snuffling at their oats we would breakfast on pounded round steak and gray milk gravy over biscuits, all of us lined at a table on the meadow grass outside the cook shack door with Bert Doran at the head.

These days I sit at the head of that table, and that's what I own. "I knew this was a good chance," Sharon said. For what I don't know. I still cannot read her eyes, when Turkey goes off and she makes her way out here from that big house in Bal-

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lard. She tells me her purple and white lilacs bloom in February and March, while our ground is still buried under snow on this side of the mountains, and I think of going there, walking up the sidewalk and shaking hands with Turkey like my visit was some kind of surprise and good idea. But that would be one hell of a mistake. Sharon has got hers and I got mine.

Last fall before the serious snow we rode the frozen fields in my Ford three-quarter ton, slamming along like it goes, and she asked me what I want to do with her property. So I showed her about fences and cattleguards and she asked me if I didn't have any more ambitions than I was showing her. "Not a one," I told her, which wasn't all of the truth.

This spring I took her with me when I harnessed the Belgians to the stoneboat sled and sledded manure from the corrals out across the swampy meadows, the rumps of those Belgians steaming in the sunlight and the trace chains clanking. I was out to rebuild the long dams which spread the water across the swales in her meadows. This is where the notion of balancing water comes into the equation between us.

It's our country way of describing the work, by which I mean leading water out from the redwood head boxes in the creek through high ditches, and turning the water out from the sodded ditches to spread in long even sheets against those low manure dams I build across the native grasslands. In the winter I feed loose hay to the cattle with my same team of Belgians harnessed to the creaking hayrack sled and the long expanses of crusted blue wind-driven snow are like more water until you wander off into the drifts.

"Balancing shit," Sharon said.

The movement of water on her property is my finest example of how things should try to be, but I didn't say a thing and went on with grunting at my work as I forked that load of manure off the sled, and Sharon kept herself quiet until we were going home through the morning. "When I was a kid," she said, "Bert would take me along."

"Bert," she said. "Bert was a son of a bitch."

"You're going to die out here," she said. "Just like Bert."

"Fair enough," I said.

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Bert whipped us all when it comes to example. Don't die before you've taken a try at enjoying whatever it is you always wanted, that's what Bert would tell you, if he was speaking to you from his gravestone over in the Harlowtown cemetery. And this is my ambition.

"Sure as hell you're right," I said. "This is the place I have picked. Just don't bury me over there in Harlowtown, like they did to Bert." Sharon never answered but just smiled like a real snake and bit at the tip of her tongue like it was something too sweet to taste.

"Not on my property," she said, and it was my turn to keep quiet.

"I'm going to sell it," she said. "I'm going to put the money into K-Mart stores. What the hell are you going to do then?"

"Same thing I'm doing. For somebody else." It wasn't anything I'd thought about, but it was true, and I only discovered it was true as it came out of my mouth.

"I guess," I said, and I told her one sure thing you can learn from only a little history of this Montana east of the divide. "Nobody around here is in it for the profit."

"You figure there's any profit for living in Ballard?" she said, and she wasn't smiling anymore. "How about Ballard?"

It took me that long to figure out that this talk of selling the property was only her idea of jerking my chain for what she saw as my own good. Sharon just kept staring away over the fifty-mile swale of the Musselshell drainage toward the Big Belt Mountains, like she was waiting for me to digest an answer to her question, and she didn't say another thing until we were back in the house and I was pouring cold water into my automatic coffee machine.

"So you and me," she said, "you figure we got a family, where nobody else belongs."

She had me there.

"Yeah," I said. "You and me."

"Since where?" she said, and she held out her right hand like she was memorizing the look of the lines in her palm.

"Not so long," I said, and she never mentioned another thing about selling the property. These are the lessons of ad-

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versity. I've burned my ladders, and I cherish Sharon beyond any dream of rich women in my bedroom. She knows I will feed her cattle and keep her fences tight, for whatever fences and money are worth.

We make our own little airplanes, and I fly mine. I will never have any use for owning even the place I stand on the ground. When she comes to visit, Sharon comes looking beautiful as she can manage for my eye. I repolish that dining-room table her mother polished with such care, and I fit precisely into my own skin, a man who is happy as he needs to be.

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Philip Levine

A Walk with Tom Jefferson

Between the freeway
and the gray conning towers
of the ballpark, miles
of mostly vacant lots, once
a neighborhood of small
two-storey wooden houses—
dwellings for immigrants
from Ireland, Germany,
Poland, West Virginia,
Mexico, Dodge Main.
A little world with only
three seasons, or so we said—
one to get tired, one to get
old, one to die.
No one puts in irises,
and yet before March passes
the hard green blades push
their way through
where firm lawns once were.
The trunks of beech and locust
darken, the light new branches
take the air. You can
smell the sticky sap rising
in the maples, smell it
even over the wet stink
of burned houses.
On this block seven houses
are still here to be counted,
and if you count the shacks
housing illegal chickens,

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the pens for dogs, the tiny
pig sty that is half cave. . .
and if you count them you can
count the crows' nest
in the high beech tree
at the corner, and you can
regard the beech tree itself
bronzing in mid-morning light
as the mast of the great ship
sailing us all back
into the 16th century
or into the present age's
final discovery. (Better
perhaps not to speak
of final anything, for
this place was *finally* retired,
the books thrown away
when after the town exploded
in '67 these houses
were plundered for whatever
they had. Some burned
to the ground, some
hung open, doorless, wide-eyed
until hauled off
by the otherwise unemployable
citizens of the county
to make room for the triumphant
return of Mad Anthony Wayne,
Pere Marquette, Cadillac,
the badger, the wolverine,
the meadow lark, the benign
long toothed bi-ped
with nothing on his mind.)
During baseball season
the neighborhood's a thriving
business for anyone

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who can make change
        and a cardboard sign
that reads "Parking $3."
        He can stand on the curb
directing traffic and pretend
        the land is his.
On mid-August nights I come
        out here after ten
and watch the light rise
        from the great gray bowl
of the stadium, watch it catch
        a scrap of candy wrapper
in the wind, a soiled napkin
        or a peanut shell and turn
it into fire or the sound
        of fire as the whole world
holds its breath. In the last
        inning 50,000
pulling at the night
        air for one last scream.
They can drain the stars
        of light. No one
owns any of this.
        It's condemned,
but the money for the execution
        ran out three years ago.
Money is a dream, part
        of the lost past.
Joe Louis grew up a few miles
        east of here and attended
Bishop Elementary.
        No one recalls
a slender, dumbfounded
        boy afraid of his fifth grade
home room teacher. Tom Jefferson
        —"Same name as the other one"—
remembers Joe at seventeen
        all one sweltering summer

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unloading bales of rags
effortlessly from the trucks
that parked in the alley
behind Wolfe Sanitary Wiping Cloth.
"Joe was beautiful,"
is all he says, and we two
go dumb replaying Joe's
glide across the ring
as he corners Schmeling
and prepares to win
World War II. Like Joe
Tom was up from Alabama,
like Joe he didn't talk
much then, and even now
he passes a hand across
his mouth when speaking
of the $5 day that lured
his father from the cotton fields
and a one room shack the old folks
talked about until
they went home first
to visit and later to die.
Early afternoon behind
his place, Tom's gathering up
the remnants of this year's
garden—the burned
tomato plants and the hardy
runners of summer squash
that dug into the chalky
soil and won't let go.
He stuffs the dried remains
into a supermarket shopping cart
to haul off to an empty block.
The zinnias are left,
the asters in browns and dirty
yellows, tough petalled

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autumn blooms, even a few
sticky green rose buds
climbing a telephone pole.
Alabama is not so far back
it's lost in a swirl
of memory. "I can see trees
behind the house. I do
believe I still feel
winter mornings, all of us
getting up from one bed
but for what I don't know."
He tips his baseball cap
to the white ladies passing
back the way we've come.
"We all come for $5
a day and we got this!"
His arms spread wide to
include block after block
of dumping grounds,
old couches and settees
burst open, the white innards
gone gray, cracked
and mangled chifforobes
that long ago gave up
their secrets, yellow wooden
ice boxes yawning
at the sky, their breath
still fouled with years
of eating garlic sausage
and refried beans,
the shattered rib cages
of beds that couldn't hold
our ordinary serviceable dreams,
blue mattresses stained
in earnest, the cracked
toilet seats of genius,
whole market counters
that once contained the red meats

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we couldn't get enough of,
burned out electric motors,
air conditioners
we suffocated, and over all
an arctic wind from Canada
which carries off
the final faint unseeable
spasm of the desire
to be human and brings down
the maple and elm leaves
of early October. If you follow
their trail of burnished arrows
scuttling across curbs and cracked
sidewalks they'll lead
you to the cellar hole of
something or someone
called Dogman. "Making do,"
says Tom Jefferson.
His neighbors swear
someone runs on all fours
with his dog packs. They claim
they can tell when
their own dogs feel the pull
of the wild ones.
The women talk of lost
house cats grown to the size
of cougars. They've heard them
crashing through the dense
underbrush of the dumping
grounds and found
huge paw tracks in the snow,
the remains of drunks
and children caught out
after dark, nothing but clean bones
revealed under ice when
the spring rains come back.
"There ain't no kids
around here," says Tom,

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"But if there were, the bones
        be about the same size."
Tom has seen vapor rising
        through the missing floorboards,
clouds of it, and maybe
        animals and man
together producing a new
        variety of steam heat.
Even I have seen a brutish
        black mongrel Dane
in late afternoon, his coat
        snow flecked, rising
on his hind legs to over
        seven feet, hanging
over fences, peering in windows
        as though he yearned
to come back to what
        we were. Winter's in everything
we say— it's coming on— we see
        it in the mad swirl
of leaves and newspapers
        doing their dances.
We feel it as iron
        in the wind. We could escape,
each of us feels in
        his shuddering heart, take
the bridge south to Canada,
        but we don't. Instead we
hunker down, slump a little
        lower in our trousers
and go slow. One night soon
        I'll waken to a late quiet
and go out to see all this
        transformed, each junked car,
each dumping ground and battered
        hovel a hill
of mounded snow, every scrap
        of ugliness redeemed

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under the light of a street lamp
or the moon. From the dark tower
of the Renaissance Center Ford built
to look down
on our degradation to the great
Ford plant downriver blowing
its black breath in the face
of creation, the one at Rouge
where he broke first our backs
and then the rest, everything
silent, suspended in a new world
like no other. For a moment
a few stars come out to share
this witness. I won't believe it,
but Tom will. Tom Jefferson
is a believer.
You can't plant winter vegetables
if you aren't,
you can't plant anything, except
maybe radishes.
You don't have to believe
anything to grow
radishes. Early August he's got
sweet corn
two feet above his head,
he stretches
his arm to show where
they grow to.
Tomatoes "remind you what tomatoes
taste like."
He was planting before the Victory Gardens.
His mother brought
the habit up from Alabama. She was
growing greens
behind the house no matter how small
her strip of land,
cosmos beside the back door,
early things

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like pansies along the fence.
"Why she could go
into a bare field and find
the purple flags,
wild, bring them home, half-
dead dirty chicks
on the palm of her hand, and they'd
grow. I could
never do that, I gave up trying
fifty years ago."
It didn't take FDR
and "The war effort"
to make a believer out of Tom.
When he went off to war
his son Tom Jr. took over
the garden and did
a job, the same son went off
to Korea and didn't
come home, the son he seldom talks
about, just as he
seldom talks about his three years
in the Seabees
building airstrips so we could
bomb Japan, doing
the war work he did at home
for less pay.
A father puts down a spade, his son
picks it up,
"That's Biblical," he says,
"the son goes off,
the father takes up the spade
again, that's Biblical."
He'd leave for work in the cold
dark of December.
Later, out the high broken windows
at Dodge Main
he'd see the snow falling
silently and know

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it was falling on the dark petals
of the last rose,
know his wife was out
back hunched
in her heavy gray sweater
letting those first flakes
slowly settle into
water on the warm
red flesh of the dime store
plants Tom Jr.
put in on his own.
Later he'd come home
in the early dark
with snow on his hair,
tracking the dirty
snow on her rug—
they say the dogs yellow
it before it hits
the ground—and she would
say nothing.
"That's Biblical," he says.
"We couldn't even look
near each other
for fear of how
one might make the other cry.
That's Biblical,
knowing the other so well
you know yourself,
being careful the way she was
never to say nothing
or show the least sign."
Tom picks a maple leaf
stiff backed and brown
from the gutter,
holds it against the distant
pale sky streaked
with contrails. Maybe even
war is Biblical, maybe

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even the poor white
        fighting the poor black
in this city for the same
        gray concrete housing,
the same gray jobs
        they both came
north for, maybe that's
        Biblical, the way
the Canaanites and the Philistines
        fought the Israelites,
and the Israelites killed
        the Amalakites
always for the same land.
        "God wanted Saul
to kill them down to the last lamb.
        He didn't,
and he went crazy. Back
        in the riots of '42
they did not kill us down
        to the last lamb.
They needed us making airfields
        the way they needed us
making Fords before the war,
        maybe that's why
they went crazy." There at the end
        of the street is his house,
his since he came home
        and could never leave.
The wisteria along the side
        has grown to the thickness
of his own wrist, the back yard
        is roses still, squash
coming on, onions in late
        bloom to be tricked
by the first cold, potatoes
        hidden underground,
they think, forever.
        "It's Biblical.

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The way David plays for Saul so he
can weep, and later
when his turn comes David
weeps for Absalom.
It's Biblical, you cry,
it's Biblical you don't,
either way. That's Biblical."
What commandment
was broken to bring God's
wrath down on these streets,
what did we wrong, going
about our daily lives,
to work at all hours until
the work dried up,
then sitting home until home
became a curse
with the yellow light
of afternoon falling
with all the weight of final
judgment, I can't say.
It's Biblical, this season
of color coming
to its end, the air swirling
in tiny cyclones
of brown and red, the air
swelling my lungs,
banging about my ears so that
I almost think I hear
Tom say "Absalom" again, a name
owed to autumn
and the autumn of his hopes.
It's Biblical,
the little pyres pluming
the afternoon gray and blue
on these corners, the calm
of these childless streets,
a dog howling from a distant
block, another answering,

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the calls of the chained animals
going back and forth
so plaintive and usual no one
hears. The sparrows
fan out across the grassless yards
busily seeking
whatever seeds the cold winds
burst forth, and this
day is coming to its end
with only the smallest
winter birds to keep
the vigil. "We need
this season," Tom has said,
but Tom believes
the roots need cold,
the earth needs to turn
to ice and snow so a new fire
can start up in the heart
of all that grows.
He doesn't say that.
He doesn't say the heart
of ice is fire waiting,
he doesn't say the new seed
nestles in the old,
waiting, frozen, for the land
to thaw and even these streets
of cracking blacktop long gone gray,
the seven junked cars
the eye can note collapsed
on slashed tires, their insides
drawn out for anything, he doesn't
say all this is a lost land,
it's Biblical. He parks his chromed
shopping cart under the porch,
brushes the dirt and leaves
from his worn corduroy—
six feet of man, unbowed—
and locks the knee-high gate

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of his fence that could
        hold back no one,
smiles and says the one word,
        "Tomorrow," and goes in.
Later he'll put the porch light on,
        though no one's coming.
The crazy Indian colors
        are blooming as the sun
begins to go, deep maroons
        they tell us are the signs
of all the earth we've pumped
        into the sky.
The same rich browns the ground
        reveals after rain,
the veins of orange I've uncovered
        digging the yard
spring after spring. Never once
        have I found the least sign
that this was once the Indian's
        ground, perhaps a holy land,
not a single arrow head
        or shard, though I
have caught a sudden glint of
        what I didn't know
while turning over dirt I swore
        was never turned before
only to kneel to a bottle cap
        polished down
to anonymity or a wad
        of tinfoil
from an empty pack
        of Luckys, curled
to the shape of whatever
        vanished human hand
tossed it off. We were not
        idle hands. Still a kid
when I worked nights
        on the milling machines

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at Cadillac transmission,
        another kid just up
from West Virginia asked me
        what was we making,
and I answered, I'm making
        2.25 an hour,
don't know what you're
        making, and he had
to correct me, gently, what was
        we making out of
this here metal, and I didn't know.
        Whatever it was we
made, we made of earth. Amazing earth,
        amazed perhaps
by all it's given us,
        as amazed as I
who stood one afternoon
        forty years ago
at a railroad crossing
        near Joy Road
as the Sherman tanks passed
        two to a flat-bed car,
on their way to a war,
        their long guns
frowning down identically, they
        passed some twenty minutes
or more while the tracks groaned,
        the trestle snapped
and sighed with so much stubborn
        weight of our going
Later, in the forge room
        at Chevy, now a man,
still making what I never knew,
        I stood in the silence
of the great presses slamming
        home, the roar of earth
striking the fired earth, the reds
        searing their glowing image

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into the eye and brain,
        the oranges and roses
blooming in the mind long
        after, even in sleep.
What were we making out
        of this poor earth good
for so much giving and taking?
        (Beets the size of fists
by the thousands, cabbages
        as big as brains
year after year, whole cribs
        of peppers, great lakes
of sweet corn tumbling
        by the trailer load,
it gave and gave, and whatever
        we had it took.)
The place was called Chevy
        Gear & Axle—
it's gone now, gone to earth
        like so much here—
so perhaps we actually made
        gears and axles
for the millions of Chevies
        long dead or still to die.
It said that, "Chevrolet
        Gear & Axle"
right on the checks they paid
        us with, so I can
half-believe that's what we
        were making way back then.

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JOURNEY TO THE LOST STATE

In the Tennessee country of my forbears it was not uncommon for a man of good character suddenly to disappear. He might be a young man or a middle-aged man or even sometimes a very old man. It was always assumed that he had gone away of his own volition and that he had good and sufficient reason for resettling himself elsewhere. Such disappearances were especially common in our very earliest history, before Tennessee had achieved statehood even, but they continued all through the nineteenth century and even into the twentieth. I was brought up on stories of such disappearances. I came to think of them as a significant part of our heritage: the man who had disappeared without leaving behind any explanation of his going. When in very recent years I found myself preoccupied with the possible whereabouts of an old cousin of my mother's, one Alfred Benton Bradshaw, I could not be mindful of those old stories. By this time I was already a middle-aged man with a grown up son of my own, and my mother was of course long since dead. This middle-aged preoccupation of mine soon developed into an obsession, say a mania. I wished above all things almost to know what had happened to this cousin and where he might be living out his days. I felt I could not rest until I discovered his whereabouts. It was like some passion of my youth that had been suppressed and was now manifesting itself in a more virulent form. It was like an opportunity that I had always longed for and that would not ever come again.

Because my own father had died when I was barely ten years old I used as a boy to fantasize that he too had merely gone off somewhere

A manuscript page from Peter Taylor's story "Journey to the Lost State."

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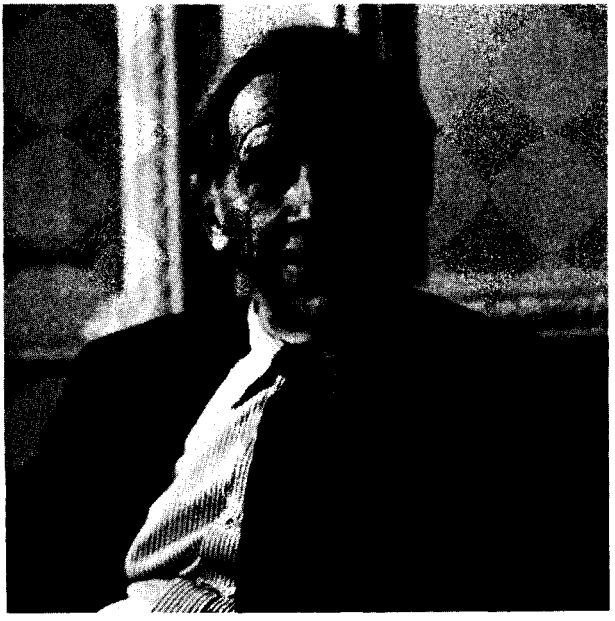

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The Art of Fiction XCIX
Peter Taylor

Peter Taylor is a storyteller of fixed abode. His ancestral ghosts inhabit an irregular triangle formed by Memphis, Nashville, and the farm at Trenton in Gibson County where Taylor spent much of his childhood.

The power and resilience of his roots have allowed him a peripatetic life. He and his wife, the poet Eleanor Ross Taylor, have owned nearly thirty houses since the first small duplex they bought in 1947 with the Randall Jarrells when Taylor and Jarrell were teaching at the Women's College of the University of North Carolina.

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Our conversations over the tape recorder took place, as well, in many locations. The first was in the spring of 1981 in a dim corner of the Cosmos Club, a stately Victorian edifice on Massachusetts Avenue in Washington, D.C., where Taylor stayed while conducting a week's workshop at American University. He sat under a larger-than-life portrait of some long-gone member in a stiff wooden chair that could only remind him that he too was sitting for a portrait rather than enjoying social conversation. He was not, then or ever, fully reconciled to the idea of a recorded dialogue, an extended self-revelation. "There is something offensive to me about a man or woman's confessing all to the whole world. I never believe a word he or she says, especially when it's ever so consistent. Always there is that ugly ego exposed. In my own case, how could I possibly assume that the world would have any interest in what I have to say about myself and/or my writing? Anybody but a friend, that is."

And so we talked "on contingency"—that if at the end it was too hateful to him, the transcript would go into a locked drawer. We met and talked a half-dozen times over a period of years in a variety of places—early on, in a high-ceilinged room with fresh paint but no furniture that my husband and I had just bought in mid-Manhattan. We dragged in the kitchen table and sat at the two small rush-seated chairs until they got too uncomfortable, then adjourned to the Russian Tea Room, nearby, where the tape recorder picked up more of the gossip from the next table than of Taylor's off-the-record stories of being young with Jarrell and Robert Lowell and Katherine Anne Porter. We met again that winter in Key West, Florida, where he and Eleanor wintered in a white conch house with a deep tree-shaded garden. There was a party that weekend, with the Taylors' customary mix of local people and old friends, some of whom were poets and fiction writers—James Merrill, Richard Wilbur, John Ciardi, James Boatwright.

His house in Charlottesville, Virginia, is the serene repository of many inheritances: mellow old furniture and tall family portraits, oriental rugs on polished floors. There is a youth-

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ful portrait of Taylor over the mantelpiece in the library, across from the carved Victorian settee that he and Eleanor were bequeathed by Jean Stafford (Lowell) Liebling, a friend for decades. In his basement study, books line the walls, floor to ceiling, and a pair of sofas covered with old, Indian handblocked cotton offer comfort for the reader, or a place to sit and talk. Across the room his workdesk stands against the wall. It has many small drawers and its writing surface closes up like a box. On one side a dictionary lies open on its own table; on the other his seafoam Olivetti manual. At eye-level atop the desk an ornate square clock of polished burl waits, its glass ajar, to be set and wound. Everywhere in these rooms one is conscious of the past as useful, beautiful and suffused with meaning.

INTERVIEWER

Why did you become a writer, a storyteller?

PETER TAYLOR

I think a great part of it was the storytelling in the family. I was lucky to come along out of this family of storytellers. My grandfather was famous for his tales. There used to be cartoons about him in the Washington papers—standing in the Senate cloakroom telling stories to the other senators. He was of the generation just following the Civil War; he was a little boy then. His father was of the war generation. He, that great grandfather, was a lawyer, a clergyman, a landowner. He went to Princeton and was a Unionist. In fact, he was Commissioner of Indian Affairs under the first President Johnson. He was enlightened and freed his slaves. But his wife was for the Confederacy, more or less. Her brother was a Confederate senator from Tennessee. That's why the younger children of the next generation were afterwards to become Democrats and the older children Republicans. We grew up, in my generation, with political battles, sometimes bloody, at home between those great-uncles and aunts. But I think it did give me a sense of history, a sense of the past. I began to make up stories about these things, the old houses, Robert E. Lee, southern things that I was obsessed by even then, at eight or nine. And I did

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have considerable imagination, of course, and so when I began to make up stories about my forebears, I began, you know, to exercise my power over them. *That's* one of the satisfactions of writing fiction! One of the reasons that all of this was so interesting to me was that we lived outside the South, away from what we thought of as the South, and yet there was constant talk at our table about Tennessee, constant plans for going back there at Christmas, at Easter, at every holiday. This was when we lived in St. Louis. We considered that far up north! My mother and father thought Nashville was the center of the world. When we lived away from there it was either because my father was in business in St. Louis or my grandfather in politics in Washington. There are no more loyal Southerners than those who grew up *just* outside the South or in the border states. We lived in a little South of our own in St. Louis. We had a houseful of servants from my father's farm in the cotton country of West Tennessee, and the adults—black and white—would talk about the South, about the way things used to be there. We had very intelligent people working for us. Lucille, who really ran the house, had been to college for two or three years, and had taught school. That was the tragic thing in those days: even when the negroes went off to college, there was really nothing they could do with their education—especially during the Depression years—and they would come back home and go into service. Lucille would talk to me about my writing and my efforts to paint. I had more conversations with her than with my mother on those subjects—and of course far more than with my father. Lucille had more influence on me when I was a child than any other adult, unless it were her cousin Basil Manly Taylor, who was our butler. It has always been difficult for me to see how people who grew up in the South, brought up by people like Lucille Taylor and B. M. Taylor, could be guilty of race prejudice. The people that loved me most and that I loved most when I was growing up, I think, were these people.

INTERVIEWER

In the stories those black servants come across as very powerful.

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TAYLOR

They were, indeed. My nurse, the Aunt Munsie in "What You Hear from 'Em?" was the same nurse that my father had when he was a baby. She absolutely belonged to us, or we absolutely belonged to her. She often talked to us about having been a slave. She never knew how old she was. The only way we could estimate her age was by remembering she always said that she was "a girl up about the big house when freedom came." That meant that she was about twelve years old, the age when she would have gone into her mistress's house as a maid, and that was before Emancipation. Mammy adored my father, but she made my mother's life hell. She had run my grandmother's house as long as *she* lived, and when her old mistress died she had to be taken on by my mother. Mother would often send her away because she would take it upon herself to dismiss one of the other servants without so much as consulting Mother. She was jealous of the other maids and would send them packing if they were in too much favor with Mother. One of the crises between her and Mother was over the use of butter plates. Butter plates were a fashion Mother had brought with her from Washington. (She and my father had married in Washington when Grandfather was in the Senate.) Mammy said, "Ain't no need in nastyin' up all them dishes." When Mother would try to dismiss her Mammy would say, "You *can't* fire me. I was here afore you come here and I'll be here when you gone." She felt she was the real authority in the house, and of course after Grandmother was dead my father spoiled her. She was a wonderful character—even Mother recognized that—very tiny, what used to be called a "Guinea nigger." She came to Tennessee, as an infant I think, by way of South Carolina. One time my father's most important client—the richest man in the state—was having dinner at our house. He and my father were talking endlessly over the meal. Mammy was in the kitchen—she ran the kitchen and cooked too. Someone else served at the table. And when the meal had gone on too long she entered through the swinging door and tapped my father on the head with her knuckles, saying, "Quit 'at talkin' and eat them vittles." This to my mother's great embarrassment and to my father's delight.

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INTERVIEWER

In the dedication to your collected stories you spoke of your mother as the best teller of tales you ever knew.

TAYLOR

She was that. She was constantly pouring out stories. You couldn't stop her. She would tell a story over and over again, and she would tell it in precisely the same words every time. My father would do that too. She would begin by saying, "Have I told you about the time. . ." Since one had heard it about twenty times, one would say, "Yes, Mother, you have." And she would proceed to tell it again. When she got very old she became less critical than formerly. That is, her inhibitions broke down and she didn't censor her stories to the same degree. We would suddenly discover new things in her stories that had been suppressed before. A shocking love affair or a divorce—I mean, that is, the *reason* for the divorce or the *real* nature of the love affair had been suppressed.

INTERVIEWER

Many of the early stories are in a woman's voice or from a woman's point of view.

TAYLOR

When I first began writing stories I wrote about blacks a great deal, and I wrote about women. I didn't begin with any conscious philosophy, but I had a store of stories that I knew, that I had been told, and I felt I had to write them. I discovered in writing them that certain people were always getting the short end. I found the blacks being exploited by the white women, and the white women being exploited by the white men. In my stories that always came through to me and from the stories themselves I began to understand what I really thought.

INTERVIEWER

As Lawrence said, not to trust the teller, but trust the tale.

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TAYLOR

I quote Frank O'Connor to my students, that when you are writing a story, at some point the story must take over. You are not going to be able to control it. I think this is true. O'Connor said he thought Joyce controls his stories too tightly—"Who ever heard of a Joyce story taking over?" he asked—and that there is a deadness about them. You have got to keep the story opened up, let the story take over at some point.

INTERVIEWER

Do you always know the ending when you begin?

TAYLOR

I know one ending. But before I've worked on a story very long I know another. That's part of the fun of it. You begin with one thing, but the story itself may change your mind by the end. I always have some idea, but I think it's important to keep your story free when you are writing it, rather than working mechanically towards a fixed ending. I often reverse my understanding in the course of writing a story. Perhaps my real feelings come out as I write.

INTERVIEWER

In ways you hadn't imagined?

TAYLOR

That happens to me more often than not. I didn't know what was going to happen in "The Old Forest." I didn't plan all the business of the hunt for Lee Ann or understand its significance. The significance began to emerge as I was writing it, along with my true feelings about the characters. The story came from something I remembered. I did have such an accident in the family car, and there were some incidents and characters like those I describe . . . There was a girl like Lee Ann and there was another set of young people that I sometimes ran with; the accident occurred a few blocks from where

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she lived, and she was involved in it. But it was only after I began writing the story that I realized the significance of that girl. Obviously it was too carefully plotted, at last, to have happened that way. Then another story of mine called "Guests," an earlier one about a family who have cousins visiting them from the country. I hadn't planned for anyone to die when I was writing the beginning of the story, but then it suddenly seemed the only way the story *could* end.

INTERVIEWER

What do you begin with, in those cases where it isn't a remembered event or an old family tale?

TAYLOR

I often begin with a character or a situation I've observed or even with a joke I've heard. Often a very serious story has begun with a joke. If a joke or anecdote sticks in my mind for years I know there must be something in it that means something to me that I am not conscious of. This is what I mean when I say I feel one learns about oneself from writing fiction. If a story has stuck with me for years, even a dirty story, a dirty joke, I'll think the story must contain some profound meaning for me and about me . . . I'll give you an example. There's a story called "Heads of Houses." Ten years before I wrote it I knew a couple who went to stay in the summer with the wife's parents up in the mountains of Tennessee. The two couples got on each other's nerves terribly. Their summer together was a disaster, more or less, and so the young husband pretended he had received a telegram or letter— I think this got into the story—calling him back to the university where he taught. When they set out for home and were starting to drive down the mountainside, they looked back and saw the father and mother and bachelor brother join hands and dance in a circle on the lawn—they were so glad the young couple had gone! And, you understand, the young couple had been feeling guilty about leaving. When I began the story, the very point of it was to be that dancing on the lawn. That's what had origi-

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nally appealed to me. But when I finished it, it was all wrong. When I saw how wrong it was I tore up the story without ever looking at it again. Then I wrote it again from scratch—in quite a different form. When I wrote it the first time it was the story of the two couples; in the background was the brother, the one who danced with the parents in a circle. That was really his only role. But by the time I got the story worked out the second time, I saw how he was really the most sympathetic character in it. Everyone else is enjoying (or suffering) a rich family life, but the old bachelor brother is not having any life at all. And by the time I finished the second version there wasn't even any dancing on the lawn. The parents and the brother are too preoccupied with the significance of the moment. The brother simply stands there juggling apples. So the important image I began with never got into the story at all. Then there is a story called "The Hand of Emmagene," about a girl who cuts off her hand. Well, I'd heard that story fifteen years before, at least. It was told to me by the same woman, Lucy Hooke, who told me the story of "Heads of Houses." She was a marvelous storyteller—you know how some people have a great talent for telling a story but can't write one. Just as many writers can't actually *tell* a story. Well, Lucy Hooke told me about the severed hand. It was her brother who found it, I think. It was a young woman's hand. Why had she done it? What had happened? In real life she was a girl from East Tennessee, which is generally considered the puritanical part of the state, up-country. Nobody knew why she cut off her hand. That's the mystery we were left with. I only knew that I must imagine why some young woman would do such a thing, what it signified. But I didn't know how to use it, or what it meant to me. Or how I would fit something like that into the quiet world of the stories I usually write. And then at last I realized that what I had to do to dramatize it was to put it against the background of the most conventional people I could think of, just perfectly plain and unimaginative people. And in dramatizing it I found its significance, at least twenty-five years after the event. I have another story called "Her Need." I have rewritten it since *In the Miro District* ap-

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peared. I was walking early one morning in Charlottesville and saw a young woman, thirty-five or so, with her teenage son beside her in her car speeding along through the residential streets, driving him somewhere. I began to speculate upon what they were doing, where they were going. I went home and wrote the story that day. Sometimes you have a story that's been in your mind a long time. I have one story that I haven't written yet that I want to write. I recently thought about it reading Trollope's *Barchester Towers*. I want to bring out the story of the people who leave a town, leave the world they have always lived in and go off and become something else. What reminded me of it was the Stanhopes in Trollope, who had been off in Italy and then came back to Barchester. They are very continental, all their manners are different, and they are rather resented and thought odd by everybody. It's a big part of the novel. Well, I have seen that happen. People would go off and become very rich someplace else and when they would come back to Nashville or Memphis or St. Louis, they weren't quite accepted. I don't know quite what it means: the people who resented them all wanted to be rich themselves. But if somebody went off and got to be president of U.S. Steel or owned it or something, the people back home rather rejected them. I'll get some little theme like that and go over it and over it and wonder why it interests me and what there is in it, ask myself where does that lead and what does it signify? Is this just a frivolous interest or a profound one? What is marvelous is when your frivolous interests (your interests in the world, just representing it and imitating life) coincide with some serious theme that you are concerned with; when the two coincide, that's what's marvelous and fun. Then sometimes a story stays in your mind for a long time and refuses to yield the significance it has for you. It's like trying to discover what your dreams mean.

INTERVIEWER

When did you know that you were going to be a writer?

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TAYLOR

When I finished school I received a scholarship to Columbia University. But it didn't cover all my expenses; my father was dead set against my accepting it. It created a great crisis in the family. My mother was all for my going—for doing whatever I chose to do. She went out to the stores and outfitted me, even packed the wardrobe trunk. But my father held out against it. He was determined that I should go to Vanderbilt, where he had gone to college. I was equally determined that I shouldn't go to Vanderbilt. So, instead, I went out to Southwestern there in Memphis and took some courses and at the same time got work at the newspaper. That was the greatest piece of good luck for me, because there in Tennessee during the Depression some of the best writers in the country (or in the English-speaking world) were teaching: Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren. I knew all those people when I was very young. Also Katherine Anne Porter and Andrew Lytle. Allen Tate particularly made a great impression on me. I had him as my freshman English instructor at Southwestern and he was electrifying. He talked about the *art* of fiction, taking it seriously as a form. It was his genius as a teacher that he made young people feel the importance of literature, the importance of art. That came just at the right moment for me. I had already realized that I had a welter of stories I wished to tell. I had written stories, I had written poems, but I had no real principles of writing. When I became interested in the formal qualities, art and life itself meant something. Later in life, Allen Tate and I quarrelled. I think he did me a great injury. But I was able to forgive him because that injury counted for almost nothing compared to what he taught me when I was young. The next summer I took a writing course with Tate, in fiction, and that was the real beginning. Allen liked my stories immensely. He wrote letters to Robert Penn Warren about them—at that time Warren and Cleanth Brooks were editing *The Southern Review*—and sent him two of my stories, without my knowledge. That was very like Tate. He was ever gener-

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ous with young people, to the end of his life. I know he sent those stories because in Warren's preface to my first book he mentions that he had rejected them and expresses regret for having done so. Actually it was very wise of him and I am grateful to him for it now. But then I am grateful to him for so many things. One can't have a better friend than Robert Penn Warren, or a more delightful companion. I saw that first story just the other day, in an old copy of a magazine called *River.* When Warren didn't take those stories, I sent it to a man who'd written to me from Oxford, Mississippi. His magazine ran just a few issues, but my first story and Eudora Welty's were in that issue.

INTERVIEWER

What came next?

TAYLOR

Allen Tate persuaded me I should go that next year to Vanderbilt. At Vanderbilt, I met John Crowe Ransom. He was a great poet. One never doubted that. But you never got to know him well—that is, not when you were a student. Later on we became good friends, played bridge together every week for years, but not in the early days. He was very different from Tate, who dramatized everything, even his friendships with students. Ransom's way was the opposite. He was all understatement. You would go to his office for a conference on a story, bring the story for him to read, and he would say almost nothing. What he *would* say was very much to the point and counted a great deal with me, but you had to prod him, pull it out and listen carefully. He had pertinent things to say, but he hated what he sometimes called "evangelical teaching." Ransom was a disciplinarian in his way and narrow: he had little interest in fiction and tried his best to persuade me to write poetry. I remember I wrote a story in which I included a little poem. The poem was necessary to the story, I believe. I kept that paper for years because he wrote on it "*B* for the story, *A* for the little poem." That was his way of pressing me to write poetry. And I have to say that Ransom prevailed, because the

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first thing I ever published was a poem, the year I graduated from Kenyon. He was the best kind of teacher or the best for me at that time—a satisfying, reassuring person to talk to about one's work just because he *was* so impersonal. When you gave him a poem to read the first thing he did was to look at the poem and tap on the desk to make sure the meter was correct. Then he carefully checked the rhyme scheme. He would not discuss other elements of the poem until he had done that. It seems now that what he taught me about writing was compression. And compression is what I have set great store by as a short-story writer. He was so questioning of every detail in the manuscript before him that you felt compelled to make everything functional and to be ready to defend it. That habit carried over into story writing. I believe that's one reason I write stories instead of novels. As Faulkner is said to have said, everyone wants to write poetry in the beginning but if you can't write poetry you write short stories, and if you can't write short stories you write novels. Well, that's too easy, but still there is some truth in it. And, of course, when I was at Kenyon I was writing poems in self-defense. The general interest there at that time was all in poetry, not at all in fiction. I've referred to Ransom's interest, of course, but it must be remembered I was rooming with Robert Lowell. And Randall Jarrell was there, too. Jarrell knew a great deal about fiction, but his chief concern was with poetry.

INTERVIEWER

Was Jarrell an important influence?

TAYLOR

He had tremendous influence on me for several years, most of all on my reading. I think I began reading Chekhov under his influence back at Vanderbilt, but I'm not sure. He was the first serious literary person I knew who read Chekhov stories and could talk about them. Other people would tell you they read or admired Chekhov but they didn't really know his stories. Very few people have read them even now. I think it's because his stories have the compression of poetry. Most readers

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don't know how he is to be read. He gives the illusion that he is just telling a simple tale. Readers often feel it's not much of a tale, that "nothing happens." But actually every line is *packed*. I don't know how much I have been influenced by him. I don't ever consciously think, "Ah, this is a Chekhov effect!" But anything you admire so much is bound to affect you. Without knowing it, you are going to steal from it, or be influenced by its subtle structure and statement. That's one reason for a young writer to read a master. But one goes through phases. Most people do. Everybody should. After Chekhov it was James for me. Since Jarrell didn't like his fiction, James became one of our great subjects for debate. He would make condescending remarks about James, say really silly things and bend double with laughter. Finally it got so we avoided the subject. I went through a period when I read nothing but James. Lowell and I tried to read *The Golden Bowl* aloud! It is very hard to do. I suppose I absorbed something from Chekhov—people have pointed out evidence of it in my work, Jarrell especially did—but James I *consciously* learned from. I imitated him. And then I had to unlearn some of it. I think it is good to imitate for a time, but then you have to discard what you can't use. In the long run, a good writer doesn't have to worry about stealing or borrowing. What he can make his own he will keep without giving it a thought. What he can't he will discard.

INTERVIEWER

Which were the Jamesian stories?

TAYLOR

I'm almost afraid to say, for fear that his influence doesn't show in the least. "A Spinster's Tale" would certainly be one, although other people may not see it. I was experimenting in those days in different ways. One of my ghost plays seems a direct steal from "The Jolly Corner," but I didn't realize it until I had almost finished writing it. It is the one where a man comes back to St. Louis to see his old girlfriend and comes

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upon himself as he might have been had he married that girl. It is perilously near "The Jolly Corner." Then I had a Lawrence period. I still consider Lawrence's short stories the greatest stories of this century. I keep going back to them. The feeling for nature in them is quite wonderful. It is rather the opposite of James. That is one of the things Jarrell would say about James, that in all of James you could never imagine finding a description of a landscape. I have dug out a few. But there are not many.

INTERVIEWER

What is your working schedule?

TAYLOR

When I'm teaching I don't work much on my manuscripts. I keep them open on my desk, look at them every morning, but I don't press myself. But that's just September to Christmas. After Christmas it's different. I devote myself entirely to my writing. I tell myself that my mornings are my writing time, no matter where I am. After an early breakfast I go to my study. Now I may not really write. Often my mind wanders off, I do other things. It may be eleven before I really get going. I'll be there daydreaming, and then suddenly the thing just starts coming. Then I go on until I eat lunch at two or so. But I have got to the point now where I can write pretty well anywhere at any time. Writing is almost like ladies' knitting—I always have it with me.

INTERVIEWER

That wasn't always true?

TAYLOR

No indeed. For a long time I couldn't write except under the strictest conditions. I began writing on the arm of a swing, on the back porch of our house—those first stories that Allen Tate liked. For a long time I couldn't write anywhere else. Just superstition. I *had* to write on the swing on the back porch.

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INTERVIEWER

The uncertainty of a beginning writer.

TAYLOR

Yes. You know you have to have two things when you begin to write. You have to have some instinct for writing stories—you may write your first stories just from that, entirely—but you also have to have some ability to learn how you did it and how it's done: how to improve upon it. I so often see young writers who do what I did, which is to write two or three stories that were quite good, and then for several years not be able to write a decent story because of being so self-conscious about it, afraid of making some awful mistake. That's when I think it is helpful to have an older writer to talk to about your work, who can say what's good about it. Often you know it's good but you don't know how you did it. But I do still like to write on a porch swing! In Key West I have a swing on the porch where I like to sit to write. It gives you something to do, keeps you from smoking—you push yourself, your feet go. . .

INTERVIEWER

The fallow time, just pushing the swing, is very important, then?

TAYLOR

Your images depend on parts of you that you don't control. You can't just 'work up' an image. You find the right way of telling the story through your dreams or something—it's very much more like that.

INTERVIEWER

Do you ever do research for a story?

TAYLOR

No, I feel very strongly against that. I read Southern history because I *like* reading it. Then suddenly I'll find it appearing in something I write. But as soon as I have a body of ideas and

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put them in a story *consciously*, that just kills it for me. When I have done it at times, it *has* killed it. I have a number of stories I've never put in a collection and never would put in a collection, partly because it seemed to me they never came to life on their own. I had forced some idea, something Freudian or political or some idea about history.

INTERVIEWER

I was trying to write something last week and found I couldn't go on until I found a street map of the city it took place in.

TAYLOR

Well, I might do that. If I didn't remember something I might look it up, or correct it afterward, but usually my tendency is just to go on. I've had things terribly wrong, and had editors straighten me out, at *The New Yorker* particularly. With "The Old Forest" *The New Yorker* called and said, our historian tells us such-and-such, that the trees in that forest had not been there as long as I said they had been there, or that the city was not founded by the person I said it was. I said Andrew Jackson laid out the city and they said it was General Winchester. Well, General Winchester and General Jackson were in business together, they were land speculators. So I had it wrong, but I didn't care.

INTERVIEWER

You left it?

TAYLOR

I think I changed it. It didn't matter. But there were some things I left that they had corrected me on. I said, well, for the sake of the story what's important is the legend I grew up with. I've always had a dislike of any form of didacticism, especially when it becomes the dominant element in writing. Character and emotional content should always be the strong elements. I think that was maybe what went wrong with my

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early novel, that I wanted it to be too profound, I was trying to put too much into it. I learned fairly early that one can handle only so much *idea* in a story. Well, or rather, *I* can!

INTERVIEWER

But memory is very important, isn't it? What is your earliest memory?

TAYLOR

Standing on the lawn of the house at Trenton and seeing a wild sunset, reds, a red-brick sunset, a thing which both exhilarated and terrified me, being out there alone. And another early memory—I was alone again, I played alone a lot, although I had brothers and sisters around—was of seeing the first airplane that I'd ever seen. A little one. They never landed near Trenton. Seeing that tiny plane up in the sky, knowing a man was in it, made me feel very lonely.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think a great memory is important for a writer?

TAYLOR

You have to have a great memory for trivia, for details that are specific and that you want to remember. I do have a good memory. A while ago I got a letter from John Berryman's first wife, Eileen Simpson, a brilliant woman. She sent me a part of a chapter of a book she was writing about Lowell and Berryman, *Poets in Their Youth*. Until I read it I hadn't realized that I remembered every detail from the first crack-up Lowell ever had. Well, of course, it was very important: he was visiting us; there was no hospital that would accept him and we had to put him in jail, until his mother and Dr. Merrill Moore flew in and took him back to Boston. It's a long story, part of it heartbreaking and part of it very funny. Allen Tate had called me from Chicago, and said, "Cal is not himself at all," and that he and Caroline Gordon had just put him on a train! Well, of course I was furious—Allen had no business putting him on a train. But I also knew that Allen had a great dramatic

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sense and I thought he must be exaggerating. I didn't think it was true when he said that Cal was beside himself. He'd behaved strangely, frightened a child at the station, and he had picked up Allen and carried him down the platform. Allen was very small. Anyhow, Allen said I was to meet him with the police at the railroad station! Well that was *some*thing! Because some time before that, when the Tates were in Maine visiting the Lowells, Caroline had thrown a peanut-butter jar at Jean Stafford Lowell and Jean ran and called the sheriff, saying, "I fear for my life." Allen was outraged. He said, "You don't call the police on your friends."

INTERVIEWER

Why did she do it? Throw the peanut butter jar?

TAYLOR

Oh, Jean said Allen was having an affair with a certain young literary woman and that infuriated Caroline. She started throwing things at Jean. . . But anyway, as soon as Cal stepped off the train I could see he was out of his head. He wasn't the Lowell I knew. He was dirty and dishevelled. So I took him to the faculty club and put him up there instead of taking him home. We had a new baby and I told him the baby was not well. But while we were having dinner in this place he began to sniff, and said, "Do you smell that?" I said no, and he said, "I know what it is, it's brimstone. He's over there behind the fern." I took him to his room, and went to my house. But a few minutes later I was called by the people at the club. They said he had come out of his room and run through the kitchen terrorizing the cooks, and then rushed out into the streets. I spent the early part of the night searching for him, going through the streets calling, "Lowell, Lowell," at the top of my voice. In the meantime he'd gone up to a movie house and stolen a roll of tickets—just reached in and grabbed the tickets and run off down the street! By now the police were looking for him too. We were all running around the town—Bloomington is not a big town!—and finally he knocked on a door that happened to be a police-

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man's house, and they took him in. For me the most traumatic part of it all was the next morning. I was just beside myself because we had been the closest friends—roommates and all—and I thought it was the end. I never thought he would be sane again. So the next morning I went down there to the jail, and he was in a block of cells, and there was nobody there with him. They let me in and locked the gate, and I went into the cell with him. I was scared to death. Finally I said, "Cal, let's pray," and he said, "Let's get down here and pray together to get out of this place." And I said—because I was scared—"Cal, I never could pray in the same room with anybody." So I went into the next cell, and we got down on our knees and prayed in adjoining cells. But then time went by and they changed guards. The new guard hadn't been told I wasn't also an inmate! I was in there four hours with him. I would call for them to let me out, and Cal would say, "That's not Christian. You call for them to let me out and I'll call for them to let you out!"

INTERVIEWER

I know you haven't written memoirs, but do you write critical essays or reviews?

TAYLOR

The last review I wrote was a review of Allen Tate's *The Fathers*, which came out, I think, in 1939. I resolved early that if I was going to teach I was never going to write criticism, and I won't. It's too hard. Why, writing criticism takes as much time as writing fiction and is a much less serious business! Teaching takes as much of my life as I want to give to generalization. And I like teaching so much better than I like writing criticism. It involves you with other people. I do all my teaching in conference, one to one. Teaching is always done best *vis-à-vis*. I worked in New York for a time at Henry Holt, just as a first reader, and I realized I disliked reading all those manuscripts from people I would never see or know anything about. It is so much more fun to see really bright young people

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trying to write and learning to read intelligently, and seeing them develop, being involved with them. So much of your life as a writer is isolating. When I think of that, I can hardly wait for my next teaching stint at some college or university. And then, too, I have a horror of defining, of limiting. Everything seems to me to be such a cliché as soon as I say it. The other problem is that as soon as I make a point, I am sure I can disprove it; I'm sure that the opposite is also true.

INTERVIEWER

You once said something in that context about Flaubert.

TAYLOR

Yes, well, of course, who can write fiction in this century without feeling some pressure from Flaubert. And some of the writers I've been influenced by, to them Flaubert was God. His was the Word. He was the Master. But you know, often I think of Flaubert's rules and regulations and wish to see if I can successfully defy them. To see how much the narrator can generalize and how much he can come in and exercise his omniscience, how far I can impose the narrator on the narrative. Because, you know, I believe if one thing can be proved by some esthetic theory, then there is inevitably another theory that can prove the opposite. The delightful thing about writing stories is that you can have it both ways. You can mull it over and cover up and deceive the reader until finally he accepts your way of doing it. The best thing of all is that you don't have to be consistent, particularly from one story to another. When I was still an undergraduate I wrote a story called "The Spinster's Tale." The next story after that was called "The Fancy Woman," in which I absolutely reversed the characters and the subject. What I wished to present in that first story was a discovery of evil, how the shock of it affected a woman's whole life. And in the other story the character was so far corrupted that she couldn't believe in her discovery of innocence. She was beyond any possibility of accepting it. Maybe that is not the right way to write, but I often bounce from one idea

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to another. So often ideas for stories are born out of other stories. You write one and you see some little minor theme in there that you wish to develop further.

INTERVIEWER

When I was reading your stories chronologically, I was conscious that many of them seemed concerned with revising some view of the past, or with present events in which the past is a vital element.

TAYLOR

I think that's one way of thinking about one's fiction. Saying, well, what if I looked at it from this other point of view? Taking stories one has heard and trying to make sense of them, trying to learn what in the closest analysis and profoundest speculation they might mean. In the beginning I wrote many stories about women. Southern women, old ladies, a lot of them. Each story came out of some incident, out of some strong feeling. I am always trying to discover in a story what it is that I am *really* trying to say about the subject and why it interests me, what it means and what I can do with it. In "Miss Leonora When Last Seen," for instance, I was trying to imagine what it was like to have *been* one of those women. To reflect *that* side, that world. I had seen such women, and I wanted to discover what they meant, what their lives meant. The women that I had seen were the most cultivated people I knew, so much more cultivated than the men in that society. And they had ideas—not explicit ideas but inceptions of ideas as to what the world should be like, what their roles were to be. I had grown up with just so many old ladies: my father, being a lawyer, looked after the estates and affairs of many of them; wherever we were living they'd come to visit us, with their wardrobe trunks. They were delightful, extremely intelligent people. They stood for the intellectual and cultural life of the society.

INTERVIEWER

Jane Barnes suggests in her essay about you that after "Miss

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Leonora" you began to explore the masculine side of life, and of your own nature.

TAYLOR

I think she hits the nail on the head. In the beginning my sympathy had been all with women, but after that I thought, well, what if I look at it from the men's point of view of that world. My wife says I'm much softer, easier on my father now when I tell stories . . . that his role changes in them from the way I used to tell them. When I was first married, my father and I had battles. On their visits, my father would insist on staying in bed and having his breakfast brought to him. I would rage and say, "He can't *do* that!" and Eleanor would say, "Oh yes." She would take his meals up, or my mother would. She remembers my raging—but I had other feelings about him, also.

INTERVIEWER

I remember an early story, "Porte-Cochère," in which the father seems very like the man in "The Gift of the Prodigal" but less sympathetically viewed.

TAYLOR

The man in the later stories is much more sympathetic than the character in the earlier. I like that story dramatically—that's what I was trying to do then, learn to write a dramatic story—but I feel I never got inside that man in "Porte-Cochère." I had someone tell me just this week that it's mechanically fine, dramatically witty, the language is satisfactory, but something is missing, something about getting inside the character. I don't think the reader is engaged in that story emotionally. I think the new stories have that. I like to think I have made some progress. One makes advances. You *do*! You come to see what your story is like. That's part of the fun: to see how you can get the other elements that are not your natural interests or concerns primarily. In that earlier story I was trying to force it really dramatically. He was not a character of the sort I was interested in at that time. I could

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probably write that story better now because I have more interest in that sort of person, maybe because since then I have seen my father and others grow old. And grown old myself. I can be more sympathetic.

INTERVIEWER

After "Miss Leonora" the next story was—

TAYLOR

"Venus, Cupid, Folly and Time." Ford Madox Ford says at some point you have to begin to make up stories. Up until then in some stories—the most anthologized like "What You Hear from 'Em?"—there's not a word that's made up. But "Venus, Cupid, Folly and Time" begins a change in my writing. It is less ironic, less funny, with fewer genteel characters, more eccentrics. I still like it as a story, but when it came out Randall Jarrell didn't like it. He told me so.

INTERVIEWER

Was that important to you?

TAYLOR

We were very close at that time. In fact, we bought a duplex together. It was great fun. He'd go over my stories and over Eleanor's poems. He loved to do that, and he'd say devastating things sometimes, but good things. I think he was the finest critic of the generation; it's a delight to read him. He would spend just an amazing amount of time on his friends' work, settling down for a whole afternoon over a story or a poem. But in the end you have to throw over your mentor. In my stories he didn't like it whenever I introduced anything very severe. He wanted me to have a very light touch, Chekhovian, not to have much serious event in it. I think he really thought of me as the Southern regional writer of memoir stories. He used to say, "Write all those stories you can, because that is a world that's gone, will never exist again, and this record of it should exist." So when that story, "Venus, Cupid, Folly and Time" came out, he was very unsympathetic. Your friends of-

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ten do this. When you want to change and are trying to do something else, they've liked that other you.

INTERVIEWER

I remember your saying that "Venus, Cupid. . ." was your first plotted story—"made" rather than evolved. You started with an effect to be achieved rather than a tale to be told?

TAYLOR

I really had in mind almost an allegory. One of the things it's about is incest—not just the brother and sister, but all the young people. It's a form of incest to want to marry only in your class, your own background exactly. That was the world I had grown up in. I had seen my brothers and sisters in it. Some of those young people—it was very sad—*couldn't* marry anyone but that way, and never married because there was nobody in that set the right age. They had other chances to marry, but nobody that would fit; it had to be "in the family," so to speak. It *is* a sort of incest to marry within a class, especially when it's within a class in a certain town. People didn't like it as well if their families married somebody from Cincinnati or New Orleans; it had to be somebody from Memphis or Nashville. That was what my idea was. I had a much clearer synopsis for that story in my mind than I usually do. That really was a turning point.

INTERVIEWER

You often start with just an image, or a single sentence, don't you? In "The Fancy Woman" it was that first sentence—"He wanted no more of her drunken palaver"?

TAYLOR

Yes. I feel justified in doing that because if you have any profound thoughts or views they will emerge from within the story inevitably. I still believe that. I tell young writers not to worry about writing a profound story because, as James said, a profound mind will produce a profound story and a superficial mind will produce a superficial story. Remember Tol-

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stoy's saying that Chekhov was so given to truth that he could not possibly have presented anything but the truth. And he said—Tolstoy said—that it's very much the way it was when he was learning to ride a bicycle. He was learning in a huge gymnasium, and there was one lady, standing in the middle, walking around there, and he kept saying to himself "whatever I do I must not run into that woman." And he circled around her—he could hardly ride the bicycle—and ran her down. That's the way Chekhov is with the truth, whatever he *tries* to do. . .

INTERVIEWER

And telling the truth is, finally, what writing is about? That wonderful quote from Montaigne about speaking the truth, not as much as you know but as much as you dare—and daring more as you grow older.

TAYLOR

I think trying to write is a religious exercise. You are trying to understand life, and you can only get the illusion of doing it fully by writing. That is, it's the only way I can come to understand things fully. When I create, when I put my own mark on something and form it, I begin to know the whole truth about it, how it was put together. Then you can begin to change things around. You know all this after you have written a lot. You really know. And it has become the most important thing in your life. It has nothing to do with craft, or even art, in a way. It is making sense of life. It is coming to understand yourself. That's what I love about Katherine Anne Porter. She managed to interpret the events of her life in her stories, just by writing them down. She knew what she was really like—and that represents the highest intelligence in the world, to know what you really are. She did. You think of a storyteller as not very intellectual at all—or I do—but someone who writes stories and lets his intelligence come out *that* way. But she was intellectual in the ordinary sense, too. Her essays are just amazing. Though she knew her art—there was no ques-

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tion about that—she was my idea of the unprofessional. I feel strongly against professionalism, against someone's feeling he has to write a book every year to keep his name before the public. I see people processing themselves, torturing themselves, for that, rather than writing out of a compulsion some story from their own experience, their own feelings. That's the way you should write, unless you are just practicing. I tell young writers to steal a plot or an idea or whatever, just to get going. See how a character comes out, how you fit it into your life. . . . You see great writers doing it too. Certainly some of James's stories came right out of Trollope. And some came from Hawthorne. It's just so clear to me that James took the work of Hawthorne and Trollope and of all kinds of writers and made of them a much greater work. I really don't think you should make money writing. Oh, I'm not going to turn down money, but people worrying about how they are going to make a living writing ought to worry about making a living some other way on the periphery, doing something congenial to them like teaching or editing. We hear a lot of complaints from writers now, especially from PEN, about the situation of the writer—well, it's *always* been awful! I think you should write for yourself, for the joy of it, the pleasure of it, and for the satisfaction that you have in learning about your life.

INTERVIEWER

What about hack work, copywriting or journalism?

TAYLOR

Some good novelists have done it. It depends on the energy of the person, whether you can afford to waste that much. If you have enough money I don't think you should do anything but write, but if you have to earn a living, there is nothing more pleasant than teaching!

INTERVIEWER

What about the alleged insularity of academic life, the Ivory Tower?

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TAYLOR

The people affected by that insularity would be affected by something else. I certainly don't think it hurt Warren and all that generation who taught. Some people can live in an academic community and write about other things. You can do that if you've had a fairly rich life, and especially if you live in the part of the world where you've always lived, and know people. And in my case, I've always made a point wherever we've lived, teaching, of having most of my friends from the town, non-academic people. In Charlottesville our best friends are not the academics. When I taught at Ohio State—I did it for six years—we found a house at the farthest end of Columbus, in a completely unacademic community. Not because we didn't like the others, but so as not to live entirely inside the academy. But if you're a writer, if you have something to say, you can find it in anything; you can write about academics . . . they're people too!

INTERVIEWER

In the last years you've been writing stories in a new form. Prose poems? What do you call them?

TAYLOR

Lowell always spoke of them as "story poems" in his homey way. That's better. I have learned not to speak of them as poems, myself. I call them broken-line prose. I began writing them when I was trying to make things shorter. I am always trying for compression. It fascinates me that my stories get longer and longer when I'm always trying to make them shorter. I began by wanting to get interest in every line, every sentence. I felt if a line is broken, if where the line ends means something, you get another emphasis. When a sentence just ends at that line, you get one kind of rhythm, one emphasis, but if it ends in the middle of the line, you get something else, the run-on lines, enjambment. All these are techniques of poetry. Oh, the sentences mean what they mean, but the fact that they're put together in a line gives another emphasis, the way it does in poetry. You have the two kinds of syntax, the

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line endings and the run-on line, and the regular syntax of the language. You can be saying a lot more in a short space. This was my feeling when I began writing them, not really *knowing* what I was doing. For years I had been very sanctimonious, saying, "I like poetry to be poetry and fiction to be fiction." In my case that's a sure sign that someday I'm going to change my mind and do just the opposite. So I began by writing just a few lines that way, in the story called "Three Heroines." The story itself was easy to write because it's almost literally what happened: an account of my going home, and my mother and the woman that had always looked after her. The story just fell into place, and I was able to work on the lines, working out the form. I submitted that story, "The Gift of the Prodigal," to *The New Yorker* in that form. I knew all along they wouldn't like it that way. I didn't like it either; I did it sort of for fun. They wrote back at once, saying they'd like to print it, but they'd like me to put it in the other form. I said I would, but that I'd like the right, if I put it in a book, to put it back in the original form. I haven't done so, however. Every story in *In the Miro District* was written in that form originally. That is, I began them all that way, but if I got halfway through and found that it got too long or I couldn't sustain the concept or that the line ends were not significant, no longer functional, then I'd give it up. It had become artificial. But most of the time I think it puts more emphasis on the texture if you think in terms of lines, if you think of the intrinsic importance of each sentence. That is my ideal in writing, that each sentence should have an intrinsic interest, and then that it should have an interest in terms of the whole story. That is the satisfaction that you get in poetry, and this is the way I think of writing a story. Even the novel-like thing I'm writing now is being written in that form.

INTERVIEWER

Have you ever written a full-length novel?

TAYLOR

One that I never published, and finally destroyed. It was the

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only really long full-length novel I ever wrote. It was about a young man in a city like Memphis, an artist, a painter, a writer, who goes away to New York. It's about his love affair with an older woman. Then years later he comes back. It's about his growing up and his discovery of the world outside, and his failures as an artist, really. But it never satisfied me. The poetry of it didn't work, the poetry of character and context, which is what I care most about. I had too many diverse themes going at one time. I thought that was what one did in a novel, but for me it didn't work. Finally, just to get it out of my system, I managed to make a sort of synopsis of it in a play called "The Early Guest." The drama department at Charlottesville did two performances of it, with masks and all sorts of things. There is absolutely not a laugh in the whole play; it's dead serious, without any irony. One performance was done for a big audience and I thought it was an excellent flop. But then it was presented again to a small highbrow audience of people just wild about the theater and I thought it was a great success, so that was some consolation.

INTERVIEWER

You once spoke of the short story as a dramatic form, more akin to playwriting than to the writing of novels.

TAYLOR

The short-story writer is concerned with compression, with saying as much as he can in a short space, just as the poet is. So he has to choose the right dramatic moment for the presentation. If he can do that in writing a story, he can have as big a canvas as he would with a novel. That's the genius of the short-story writer—finding precisely the right moment in the vital interplay between the characters. The same is true for playwrights. In a play everything has to be done in a particular scene, at a particular time, and you have to choose that. That's the business of the dramatist.

INTERVIEWER

Choosing what the curtain rises on, say, in *The Cherry Orchard*?

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TAYLOR

Yes, the curtain goes up and the trees are being cut. You'll find that Chekhov and Pirandello and many of the great short-story writers ended by writing plays that became their major works. The Irish playwrights. The only really boring thing Chekhov ever wrote was his one effort at novel writing, *The Shooting Party*. But in this country there's always been pressure on short story writers to become novelists. It's easier to sell a novel than to sell a short story, really, and so there's economic pressure to write novels. So many short-story writers that I know have agonized for years trying to write the novel that was going to make them rich or famous. Often it does. It's strange; Katherine Anne Porter is famous because of *Ship of Fools*, which is not nearly as good as her stories, and Robert Penn Warren is famous for his novels, which are not nearly as good as his poems. I think Faulkner is a greater short-story writer than novelist.

INTERVIEWER

Did you know him?

TAYLOR

No, I never knew him either in Nashville or in Memphis. But when I was overseas, in my early twenties, my sister would see Faulkner at parties. She was a very attractive person; she would tell him that she had a younger brother who intended to be a writer, and he would give her advice which she wrote to me. I have somewhere her letters telling me what to read, what to do. One of the things he said was to "Read *Anna Karenina* and *Anna Karenina* and *Anna Karenina*," which was marvelous advice, I think, but I wouldn't have supposed he would have said just that about that book. This went on during the war. When I met him afterwards, he would have nothing to do with me! Oh, he would acknowledge my existence and so on, but he really didn't like other writers. The only writer I ever knew whom he liked was Shelby Foote. He's a wonderful historian, especially his Civil War histories. He and Faulkner became good friends. I can see that they temperamentally would have had something in common other than their literary interests—masculine interests in hunting and such things.

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INTERVIEWER

You spoke earlier of trying to shorten and compress, but I have the impression that your most recent stories are often very long.

TAYLOR

I'm not trying now to write short stories. A really short story has to be concerned with a limited kind of experience, and be limited in time, I think. But if your tendency is to write longer and longer stories, then you should go ahead, I think. For one thing, I've gotten terribly interested in plot, a thing I scorned when I was a young man. When people would mention plot to me, or structure even, I was repelled. I thought there was something crass about plot. I had no interest in it. But I've learned through the years that there's something very useful in it, that there is a kind of emphasis you can achieve with plot used properly. It *punctuates!* It can say, "Well, we've gone this far" and then "this far."

INTERVIEWER

I know you admire Mann. Was this interest in plot and structure something you saw in him?

TAYLOR

I'm very admiring of the structure of his long stories—"Tonio Kröger" and "Disorder and Early Sorrow" and "Death in Venice." I had always admired Tolstoy's stories, but when I came to Mann's—well, I'd always thought I knew what a short story was and what a novel was, but when I read those stories I saw that here was something that seemed to do the best of both. James loved that form too, that of the long story, but his are different altogether. Lowell used to make fun and say I was the master of the long short novel or the short long story, something like that—but I think there *is* a difference. In Mann or some of Turgenev's stories that I admire, like "Old Portraits," a whole life is suggested, which is not what James's short novels do. Those are much more tightly made and focus on one certain area of experience. Jarrell didn't like James's

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stories because, he said, "You see how mechanically made they are!" Well, some of them *do* suggest a whole world, the same world that he gets in his great novels. But in these stories of Mann's you have it every way. As the story moves and the character is revealed, the whole world opens up. That's what's very impressive to me. I don't feel that one could see any influence in my stories—it was many years before I could even attempt such a thing—but the conception was very influential for a very long time . . . Do you know "Disorder and Early Sorrow"?

INTERVIEWER

Yes.

TAYLOR

What I admire is the whole period in history that seems to come out of that story. He has the historian, and then the drama between the young people in the story—so that it is very significant *where* and *when* the poetry of character and context takes place. And very dramatic. But without the need to reveal every part of a life.

INTERVIEWER

As you would feel in a novel?

TAYLOR

Well, in a long story you still do what you do in a short story but at the same time you suggest a great deal about the world; you imply and suggest more. In a novel you expect more explication. A story like Katherine Anne Porter's "Old Mortality" suggests whole worlds. Almost every page suggests much more than is there—history, psychology, everything.

INTERVIEWER

But it's still something that can be read in one sitting.

TAYLOR

That's what I like to think of. These long stories that I'm

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writing are something that can be read in one evening. That's what I love, to settle in for a long evening's reading, several hours. I think there's no reason to define what's a novel and what's a story finally, but in a novel you can often say—with Dreiser or someone—that it's the cumulative effect that counts. It can be very dull and bad in parts. There's not a page in Thomas Wolfe that I would really say I admire, and yet in the end he does have an impact. That's true to a lesser degree of many other important novelists—that they're not concerned with making every sentence do the kind of work that a short-story writer must. In fact, if you try to write a novel the way you write a poem or a short story, you end up with *Finnegans Wake*, and I think that's a dead end. It shows genius. Only a genius could have written it, but does anybody read it except the scholars?

INTERVIEWER

We've not talked about marriage. How has it been, having two writers in the household?

TAYLOR

Eleanor has made it possible. Also, we married fairly young and both families were living. Neither of us was alienated from parents or from their culture. We came along in that Southern agrarian movement and were terribly interested in it, both of us. But the main thing was Eleanor. When our children came along, she just made up her mind not to think of her writing much. I mean she wouldn't *admit* she was writing—if you write, you write! She devoted herself to her children and to being the daughter-in-law and the sister-in-law. She said she wasn't going to have a competition between the children and the work. It was a risk because something might have happened; but she survived, and then she began writing again. And I always kept a job. The main reason I've always taught is that I didn't want to pit my family against my writing either. But, after the children were gone, after we had played the traditional roles completely, we were in complete agreement that now we each were going to pursue our own

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selves, express our own taste, live as we want to, exactly, for some part of the year, and to write independently. In some ways we both write better in separate houses in different parts of the world! But the marriage was so cemented that it worked for us. Eleanor and I totally disagree on so many things, and yet we are able to because we have all this past in common, the family thing, and our affection for each other, and the children. But we totally disagree on all sorts of major topics of the day. She's all for abortion, so I find myself taking more and more the other line. It's such a mystery why people *do* get along. But then we did, all those years . . . I flatter myself that Jarrell used to say that we were the two best writers married to each other. He adored Eleanor. Then, I guess you have to talk in terms of psychology. We did not reject our traditional values and our backgrounds. Southerners are less likely to than people from other parts of the country. And then as other people want other things, I wanted *family*. I wanted to go on into this world seeing myself as living in a family. In a way it was a great *interest* of mine, an intellectual interest, I consider it—keeping in touch. From a very early age my mother taught me that you should never say "in-law," "brother-in-law"; it was always "my brother." That expresses something of the insistence upon the power of the family. I purposely kept going back. It is a barbarous country in which the family is not the basic unit because that means an end to the relationships between people of various age groups and—inevitably, in the extended family—various economic groups. We always had poor relations and rich relations and common relations. You might not admit it, but you had distant cousins you didn't like. During the sixties and seventies when my children and other children were living in communes, I would say that's not nearly as good a commune as the family commune; it's easy to love people who are your age and exactly your position in life, but it's not so easy to love babies and trembling old people. I know I sound like an old crank, but I think there really is a great sickness in the country—families are broken and people have no relations except with their own generation. They have better race relations with other people in their generation, but

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they don't have any relation with the very old and the very young, with people who are eccentrics, who are totally different from them. We all know how difficult it is to live in families, what a nightmare families are, what a nightmare marriage is. The family's the worst institution ever invented—but only if society is not supportive. If all society is not built upon it there's no power in it. Power is very important. If there is no power in the family then it's just a constraint and a burden. I know better than anybody, as a Southerner and as a member of large families, how terribly you paid, but then see what you pay now by this isolation, and the kind of dependency that you get from old people's homes, the indifference of bureaucrats. The humanity of the family is lost and lost forever. The particularity of life is lost when we are just so many isolated creatures. I don't know any solution for it, because for me it all hinges on that tiny little thing, the consolidation of schools, and the breakdown of the small community within this enormous community, all over the country.

INTERVIEWER

How would you like to be remembered?

TAYLOR

I would like to have as many of my stories as possible survive and be read and liked. At my age it's hard not to want to feel that your last book is your best book. And I'd like to feel that what I'm doing now is still better. When I look back on my earlier things I understand why a lot of them were ignored. They're not bad, they're not slick or cheap in any way, but I lacked knowledge of how to say what I wanted to say, and lacked knowledge of what I wanted to say. I always had the inclination to tell a story, but in my early stories I never pressed hard enough to know what it meant, as I think I do now. I wasted many years of effort writing things that were not the kinds of stories I should have been writing. I'm not ashamed of any of them, but I wish I'd written other stories that I would like to write now.

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INTERVIEWER

What are you working on now?

TAYLOR

I consider it bad luck to talk about what you're going to write—bad luck and boring to the listener. I have completed the second draft of a novel—or a long, long story—two hundred fifty pages. And I have put it away for a time. And I have about a hundred pages on another. Both have the same setting as *A Stand in the Mountains*—that is, an old-fashioned Southern summer resort.

INTERVIEWER

Now, the obligatory finale: what is the function of the artist in society?

TAYLOR

I think he is the ornament of society! Oh, there is not just one role for the artist in society. He has many roles and he has a different role as society changes, and in different societies. In medieval society it was one thing and in the Renaissance it became another, moving far away from doing saints in stone. He can be a seer at times, and in the eighteenth century he was the satirist, the artist stepping back and holding up the mirror to society. Moreover, I don't think the same kind of person is necessarily an artist or a poet in one century as another. A lot of people would disagree, but I don't think Milton would necessarily have been a poet if he had been born in the mid-nineteenth century. Or some other poets, Auden for instance. I think what's possible for the artist in a society attracts different kinds of people. I think Jefferson would have been a scientist in another age and I think John Randolph of Roanoke would have been a poet or a literary man in another age. But because they lived in Virginia at that time they both had to be politicians first, or statesmen, and they were. In Virginia at that time every intellectual pursuit was for the Commonwealth. That's an example, sort of in reverse!

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INTERVIEWER

And now?

TAYLOR

I think the artist's role now is to resist uniformity and all the evils of industrial society and the scientific age. The arts and the sciences *are* enemies. It's the particular against the general. The artist is something *outside* society. I don't believe in a literary profession. I think that being a writer is much more the pursuit of a religion. I have a religious feeling about it. It's not a priesthood, but it's one step back. I think of myself as somebody who writes out of a compulsion, out of a longing to understand his life.

—**Barbara Thompson**

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Halloween, Via Dolorosa

Russell Working

Though it was pitch dark on the road where the Foxes parked and you tried to keep from stepping in the black puddles of icy mud when you looked up at the stars, North Main Street was brightly-lighted and decorated with lanterns and paper carved pumpkins in the windows, and the street was closed off with flashing barricades and crowded from one end to the other: from the tightly-packed mob around the bandstand where a punk band was pounding out grating music and jumping sometimes with their guitars, to the end of the road near Gepetto's, where the crowd thinned out and everyone stopped and stood, puzzled and bemused, before turning back to walk again. They looked at each other, and now at this end of the street it seemed funny and innocent. Some of them were really good. A giant in a blue gown was lurching through the crowd, and small men held sticks attached to each arm. They made the giant wave. The pirate Jesse held his father's hand.

"Look!"

"Shakespeare," Fox said.

Fox was a monster. He had a Gila monster's head, with

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green fur on the pate and down the back of the neck, and he wore a coat and jeans and tennis shoes. He was smoking a cigar, stuck in a hole in the mask's gullet, and when he puffed smoke came out his eyes. People laughed and pointed at Fox. "Look at that guy," a witch said. "I love you." Fox was walking, and he bumped into her.

He said something, and she went on.

"You bumped her," said Jesse.

Fox said something.

"What?"

He bent over by Jesse's ear. "I can't see out of this thing. The eye slits are too small. Would you help steer your old man? I'll take it off in a minute."

"OK, Dad."

"Do you like this?"

"Yeah."

"Is it scary, kid?"

"No. A little bit."

"Good. A little scary is fun, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

"Let's head back down the street."

They went toward the noise.

Nuns were the most common, and after them, buxom women in shiny red low-cut dresses with fringe around the edges. Richard Nixon was popular, too. Some nuns wore real habits and rosaries and might have been nuns for all you could tell except that one of them was saying, "Son of a bitch," as she swished past. The Foxes were Lutheran, not Roman Catholic. There was no such thing as Lutheran nuns.

Fox was hot, and the mask full of smoke, making his eyes water. He blinked. His breath condensed on the plastic and ran in cold rivulets into his collar. He gritted the cigar in his teeth so it would not touch the plastic and melt it.

An eight-legged Chinese dragon danced past. It trotted in step, weaving its way through the crowd, and headed straight for Fox, until Jesse realized his father would be trampled and pulled him hard to the left and the dragon went on by. Its eyes were lit up.

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"Boy, that startled me," Fox said. "Where did that come from? I ought to take this off so I can see. Maybe one more trip down the street to show off. I've got one more cigar. Then I need to see, too."

Fox pulled off his mask and lit another cigar. His hair was messy and damp, and he grinned and winked at Jesse. He put the mask back on. He could not find the mouth hole, and he nearly stuck the cigar in his eye.

"Everybody's staring at you, Dad."

"They envy my costume. K-mart special."

Fox managed to get the cigar in the hole of the mask, and he puffed away. His eyes smoked, and some girls came by and laughed and said, "Cool."

A cowboy came by with his horse attached around his midriff. He walked on his own feet, and the horse's legs dangled. He fired a cap gun in the air.

"Dad!"

"Yep."

Then a giant furry blond figure appeared, his head dark against a globe of light around a streetlamp, and Jesse stopped flat. The creature squatted beside the boy. He growled, "The Force be with you."

Fox snarled at him and the creature rose and growled, hands on his hips. Then he strode on. He had tennis shoes instead of furry padded feet.

"He's a good guy, Dad."

"I know. Gorillas are always good guys."

"It wasn't a gorilla. It was Chewbacca from Star Wars."

"No kidding?" Fox looked back over his shoulder. "I couldn't tell."

"You growled at him."

"It was a friendly growl."

Jesse led his father along past a six-pack of beer trotting down the road. The cans were laughing. "We'd never make it through the door," a can hollered back at someone.

Nuns were everywhere. One nun knelt in the street, holding up a stick with a doll on the end. The doll was covered with ketchup, which dripped down the stick onto her hands. She

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cried out in a quavery voice, "Sinners! You're on the road to hell. Stop the slaughter of the innocents."

A crowd stood in a circle around her, laughing. Ronald Reagan poured beer on her and made the sign of the cross.

"The name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost," President Reagan said.

The crowd howled.

"What are they doing, Dad?"

"What?" Fox looked around. He tilted his head back so he could see through the nostrils. He gripped Jesse's hand tight and said, "Let's walk on," and he shoved his way through the crowd, dragging his son by the hand. They bumped into a man in a dress, who said "Ooo!" Fox said, "We don't need to look at them."

"What were they doing?"

"Just being stupid."

"Were they taking the Lord's name in vain?"

"Yes."

Satan walked past wearing a red skintight suit. A pentacle was drawn on his forehead, and one of his arms was artificial, with a shiny metal hook on the end. Jesse was going to say something about the arm to his father when he realized it was real. He shivered. Fox was chewing the end of his cigar and looking the other way. Jesse squeezed his father's hand.

They were close to the band now, and the crowd made a noise, and through a gap Jesse saw Jesus. Jesus wore only a loincloth; he trudged along carrying a hollow plywood cross. A crown of thorns encircled his head, and stripes from a scourging were painted on his body. Jesse felt sick.

"Dad," he said. "Jesus."

Fox was puffing rapidly on the stub of his cigar; it was getting too short to be safe, and it might melt the plastic. He took a few final draws then dropped the cigar on the pavement and ground it out under his sole. He removed the mask and said, "Ah. Now I can breathe."

"Dad," said Jesse. "A man dressed as Jesus."

Fox looked, and his face hardened. The man Jesus was grin-

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ning, and he bellowed, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabacthani." Some people laughed, but an old man standing near the Foxes told a woman dressed as Charlie Chaplin, "I can't believe it. I bloody cannot believe it." Fox clenched his fists.

"Let's get out of here," Fox said.

They walked up the street, and Jesse held his father's trembling hand. Fox wore his mask like a hat, and his face showed below the eyebrows. A couple of drunk college students staggered by, and one of them pointed at Fox and said, "Look at that one. He's fucking ugly."

Jesse started to cry. The other college boy said, "Now look what you've done," as they weaved away.

It was a long walk to the car, and Fox carried Jesse on his back. A small trailer was parked in a lot full of weeds up past the railroad tracks, and a light was on in the window, glowing through the yellow curtains and filmy broken window that was patched with duct tape. Jesse wiped his cheeks on his father's shoulders and thought, If only we make it that far. If we pass the window with the light on and the barking dog, we'll stay alive. If we make it to the car. Fox's pace was plodding, and Jesse thought. If he would run. If I stay awake that far.

The dog chained to an orange tree was barking, and it paced under the canopy of slick oily leaves and howled. The chain was long enough that the dog could reach Jesse if it tried, but a python was coiled around the dog's legs and torso. You should stay away from the dog, Jesse knew, but the snake was deadly. The snake left the dog and slithered across the grass at him. Jesse thought, A weapon, and there was a machete in his hand. He beheaded the snake. The head was snapping on the ground, and Jesse leaped out of the way of the fangs. Then the Devil said to him, "Pick it up."

Fox carried him away and brought him inside the trailer. Jesse said, "Why are we going in here?" "Shh," said Fox. "We're home." Jesse's mother was there. Fox said, "We've got one tired buccaneer here." They put him on the bed, and he began crying as they took off his jacket and pants and shoes and socks. "Ow!" Jesse said. His mother wiped his moustache off with a

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warm washcloth, and she said, "Stop it now. Here, blow your nose." He honked his nose in the washcloth. She tucked him in in his pirate shirt and underwear.

"How did it go?" she said.

"I don't know if I want to go next year," said Fox.

"Why?"

"I'll tell you later."

"Did Jesse like it?"

"I think so, up until the end. I'll tell you about it."

Jesse started crying again.

"Shush," his mother said. But Jesse could not stop sobbing. "I dreamed I was in hell," he said.

Fox sat on the edge of the bed and stroked his son's messy hair. "It's OK," he said. "We're home now."

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Five Poems by Federico García Lorca

Blind Panorama of New York

No, it isn't the birds
covered with ash,
no, it isn't the cries beating against the windows
of the wedding,
it is the delicate creatures of the air
that body forth from fresh blood in the
inextinguishable darkness.
But no, it isn't the birds,
because the birds will soon become oxen;
they could become white rocks with the moon's help
and they are always wounded boys
before the judges lift the cloth.

Everyone understands the pain that accompanies death,
but genuine pain doesn't live in the spirit,
nor in the air, nor in our lives,
nor on these terraces of billowing smoke.
The genuine pain that keeps everything awake
is a tiny, infinite burn
on the innocent eyes of other systems.

An abandoned suit weighs so heavily on the shoulders
that the sky often shrugs them into ragged togetherness.
And those who die in childbirth learn in their last hour
that every murmur will be stone and every footstep will throb.
We forget that the mind has boroughs
where Chinese and caterpillars devour the philosopher.
And some feeble-minded children in the kitchens have
discovered
tiny swallows on crutches
that could pronounce the word love.

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No, it isn't the birds.
A bird can't express the troubled fever of a lagoon
or the urge to murder someone that oppresses us
every moment,
or the metallic hum of suicide that revives us
every morning.
It is a capsule of air where we suffer the whole world,
a tiny space alive in the crazy unison of light,
an indefinable ladder on which clouds and roses forget
the Chinese howl that boils over on the waterfront
of blood.
I've often lost myself
in order to find the burn that keeps all things awake
and all I've found are sailors leaning over the balustrades
and tiny sky creatures buried beneath the snow.

But genuine pain is on other plazas
where crystallized fish are dying inside tree trunks,
plazas of blue sky alien to the unscathed statues
of antiquity
and to the intimate tenderness of volcanos.

There is no pain in the voice. Only the teeth exist,
but isolated teeth that will be silenced by black
satin.
There is no pain in the voice. Only the earth
exists here.
The earth and its timeless doors
which lead to the blush of the fruit.

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Living Sky

I won't be able to complain
though I never found what I was looking for.
Near the dried-up stones and vacant insects,
I won't see the sun's duel with the creatures
of flesh and blood.

But I will go to the first landscape
of shocks, fluids and murmurs
that seeps into a new-born child,
and where all surfaces are avoided,
so I will know the joyful target
of my search
when I'm flying, jumbled with love
and sandstorms.

There, the frost of burned-out eyes won't reach,
nor the bellowing of a tree, murdered by
the caterpillar.
There, all the shapes intertwine and have
the same frenetic, forward expression.

You can't pass through the swarming corollas —
the air dissolves your teeth of sugar.
And you can't caress the elusive fern
without feeling the utter astonishment of ivory.

There, under roots and in the medulla of the air,
erroneous things are understood as true,
the chrome swimmer who secretly awaits
the finest wave
and the flock of nocturnal cattle with a woman's
little red feet.

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I won't be able to complain
though I never found what I was looking for;
but I will go to the first fluid landscape
  of heartbeats
so I will know the joyful target of my search
when I'm flying, jumbled with love and sandstorms.

I'm used to the cool air when I fly over empty beds,
over the squalls and ships run aground.
I stumble sleepily through eternity's fixed hardness
and love at the end without dawn. Love. Visible love!

Eden Mills, Vermont, August 24, 1929

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Dawn

Dawn in New York has
four columns of mire
and a hurricane of black pigeons
splashing in the putrid waters.

Dawn in New York groans
on enormous fire escapes
searching between the angles
for spikenards of drafted anguish.

Dawn arrives and no one receives it in his mouth
because morning and hope are impossible there.
And sometimes the furious swarming coins
penetrate like drills and devour abandoned children.

Those who got out early know in their bones
there will be no paradise or loves that bloom and die;
they know they will be mired in numbers and laws,
in mindless games, in fruitless labors.

The light is buried beneath chains and noises,
an important warning to rootless science.
And crowds stagger sleeplessly through the boroughs
as if they had just escaped a shipwreck of blood.

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Death

To Luis de la Serna

How hard they try!
How hard the horse tries to become a dog!
How hard the dog tries to become a swallow!
How hard the swallow tries to become a bee!
How hard the bee tries to become a horse!
And the horse,
what a sharp arrow it yanks from the rose,
what a pale rose rising from its lips!
And the rose,
what a knotted flock of lights
and cries in its stem's living sap!
And the sap,
what daggers it dreams in its vigils!
And the daggers,
what a moon without stables, what nakedness,
eternal and blushing flesh they seek out!
And I, on the roof's edge,
what a burning angel I look for and am!
But the plaster arch,
how vast, how invisible, how minute,
without even trying!

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Ode to Walt Whitman

By the East River and the Bronx
boys were singing, exposing their waists,
with the wheel, with oil, leather and the hammer.
Ninety thousand miners taking silver from the rocks
and children drawing stairs and perspectives.

But none of them could sleep,
none of them wanted to be the river,
none of them loved the huge leaves
or the shoreline's blue tongue.

By the East River and the Queensborough
boys were battling with industry
and the Jews sold to the river faun
the rose of circumcision
and over bridges and rooftops, the mouth
of the sky emptied
herds of bison driven by the wind.

But none of them paused,
none of them wanted to be a cloud,
none of them looked for ferns
or the yellow wheel of the tambourine.

As soon as the moon rises
the pulleys will spin to alter the sky;
a border of needles will besiege memory
and the hearses will bear away those who do not
work.

New York, mire,
New York, wire and death.
What angel is hidden in your cheek?
Whose perfect voice will sing the truths of wheat?
Who, the terrible dream of your bruised anemones?

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Not for a moment, Walt Whitman, lovely old man,
have I failed to see your beard full of butterflies,
nor your corduroy shoulders frayed by the moon,
nor your thighs as pure as Apollo's,
nor your voice like a column of ash;
old man, beautiful as the mist,
you moaned like a bird
with its sex pierced by a needle,
enemy of the satyr,
enemy of the vine,
and lover of bodies beneath rough cloth.
Not for a moment, virile beauty,
who among mountains of coal, billboards and railroads,
dreamed of becoming a river and sleeping like a river
with that comrade who would place in your breast
the small ache of an ignorant leopard.

Not for a moment, Adam of blood, macho,
man alone at sea, Walt Whitman, lovely old man,
because on penthouse roofs,
gathered at bars,
emerging in bunches from the sewers,
trembling between the legs of chauffeurs
or spinning on dance floors wet with absinthe,
the faggots, Walt Whitman, point you out.

He's one too! That's right! And they land
on your luminous chaste beard,
blonds from the north, blacks form the sands,
crowds of howls and gestures,
like cats or like snakes,
the faggots, Walt Whitman,
the faggots filthy with tears, flesh for the whip,
the boot or the teeth of the lion tamers.

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He's one too! That's right! Stained fingers
point to the shore of your dream
when a friend eats your apple
with a slight taste of gasoline
and the sun sings in the navels
of boys who play under bridges.

But you didn't look for scratched eyes,
nor the darkest swamp where someone submerges children,
nor frozen saliva,
nor the curves slit open like a toad's belly
that the faggots wear in cars and on terraces
while the moon lashes them on the street corners of terror.

You looked for a naked body like a river,
bull and dream who would join wheel with seaweed,
father of your agony, camellia of your death,
who would groan in the blaze of your hidden equator.

Because it's all right if a man doesn't look for his delight
in tomorrow morning's jungle of blood.
The sky has shores where life is avoided
and there are bodies that shouldn't repeat themselves
in the dawn.

Agony, agony, dream, ferment and dream.
This is the world, my friend, agony, agony.
Bodies decompose beneath the city clocks,
war passes by in tears, followed by a million gray rats,
the rich give their mistresses
small illuminated dying things,
and life is neither noble, nor good, nor sacred.

Man is able, if he wishes, to guide his desire
through a vein of coral or a heavenly naked body.
Tomorrow, loves will become stones, and time
a breeze that drowses in the branches.

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That's why I don't raise my voice, old Walt Whitman,
against the little boy who writes
the name of a girl on his pillow,
nor against the boy who dresses as a bride
in the darkness of the wardrobe,
nor against the solitary men in casinos
who drink prostitution's water with revulsion,
nor against the men with that green look in their eyes
who love other men and burn their lips in silence.
But yes against you, urban faggots,
tumescent flesh and unclean thoughts,
mothers of mud, harpies, sleepless enemies
of the love that bestows crowns of joy.

Always against you, who give boys
drops of foul death with bitter poison.
Always against you,
Fairies of North America,
Pájaros of Havana,
Jotos of Mexico,
Sarasas of Cádiz,
Apios of Seville,
Cancos of Madrid,
Floras of Alicante,
Adelaidas of Portugal.

Faggots of the world, murderers of doves!
Slaves of women, their bedroom bitches,
opening in public squares like feverish fans
or ambushed in rigid hemlock landscapes.

No quarter given! Death
spills from your eyes
and gathers gray flowers at the mire's edge.
No quarter given! Attention!
Let the confused, the pure,
the classical, the celebrated, the supplicants
close the doors of the bacchanal to you.

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And you, lovely Walt Whitman, stay asleep
on the Hudson's banks
with your beard toward the pole, open-handed.
Soft clay or snow, your tongue calls for
comrades to keep watch over your unbodied gazelle.
Sleep on, nothing remains.
Dancing walls stir the prairies
and America drowns itself in machinery and lament.
I want the powerful air from the deepest night
to blow away flowers and inscriptions from the arch
where you sleep,
and a black child to inform the gold-craving whites
that the kingdom of grain has arrived.

—translated from the Spanish
by Greg Simon and Steven L. White

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Exorcising Beckett

Lawrence Shainberg

I met Beckett in 1981, when I sent him, with no introduction, a book I'd written, and to my astonishment, he read the book and replied almost at once. Six weeks later, his note having emboldened me to seek a meeting, our paths crossed in London, and he invited me to sit in on the rehearsals of *Endgame* which he was then conducting with a group of American actors for a Dublin opening in May.

It was a happy time for him. Away from his desk, where his work, he said (I've never heard him say otherwise), was not going well at all, he was exploring a work which, though he'd written it thirty years before, remained among his favorites. The American group, called the San Quentin Theatre Workshop because they had discovered his work—through a visiting production of *Waiting for Godot*—while inmates at San Quentin, was particularly close to his heart, and working in London he was accessible to the close-knit family that collects so often where he or his work appears. Among those who came to watch were Billie Whitelaw, Irene Worth, Nicole Williamson, Alan Schneider, Israel Horowitz, Siobhan O'Casey (Sean's daughter), three writers with Beckett books in progress, two

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editors who'd published him and one who wanted to, and an impressive collection of madmen and Beckett freaks who had learned of his presence via the grapevine. One lady, in her early twenties, came to ask if Beckett minded that she'd named her dog after him (Beckett: "Don't worry about me. What about the dog?"), and a wild-eyed madman from Scotland brought flowers and gifts for Beckett and everyone in the cast and a four-page letter entitled "Beckett's Cancer, Part Three," which begged him to accept the gifts as "a sincere token of my deep and long-suffering love for you," while remembering that "I also hold a profound and comprehensive loathing for you, in response to all the terrible corruption and suffering which you have seen fit to inflict upon my entirely innocent personality."

The intimacy and enthusiasm with which Beckett greeted his friends as well as newcomers like myself—acting for all the world as if I'd done him an enormous favor to come—was a great surprise for me, one of many ways in which our meetings would force me to reconsider the conception of him which I had formed during the twenty years I'd been reading and, let's be honest about it, worshipping him. Who would expect the great master of grief and disenchantment to be so expansive, so relaxed in company? Well, as it turned out, almost everyone who knew him. My surprise was founded not in his uncharacteristic behavior but in the erroneous, often bizarre misunderstandings that had gathered about him in my mind. Certainly, if there's one particular legacy that I take from our meetings it is the way in which those misunderstandings were first revealed and then corrected. In effect, Beckett's presence destroyed the Beckett myth for me, replacing it with something at once larger and more ordinary. Even today I haven't entirely understood what this correction meant to me, but it's safe to say that the paradoxical effects of Beckett incarnate—inspiring and disheartening, terrifying, reassuring, and humbling in the extreme—are nowhere at odds with the work that drew me to him in the first place.

The first surprise was the book to which he responded. Because it was journalism—an investigation of the world of

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neurosurgery—I had been almost embarrassed to send it, believing that he of all people would not be interested in the sort of information I'd collected. No, what I imagined he'd really appreciate was the novel that had led me to neurosurgery, a book to which I had now returned, which dealt with brain damage and presented it with an ambiguity and dark humor that, as I saw it, clearly signaled both his influence and my ambition to go beyond it. As it turned out, I had things exactly backward. For the novel, the first two chapters of which he read in London, he had little enthusiasm, but the nonfiction book continued to interest him. Whenever I saw him, he questioned me about neurosurgery, asking, for example, exactly how close I had stood to the brain while observing surgery, or how much pain a craniotomy entailed, or, one day during lunch at rehearsals: "How is the skull removed?" and "Where do they put the skull bone while they're working inside?" Though I'd often heard it said of him that he read nothing written after 1950, he remembered the names of the patients I'd mentioned and inquired as to their condition, and more than once he expressed his admiration for the surgeons. Later he did confess to me that he read very little, finding what he called "the intake" more and more "excruciating," but I doubt that he ever lost his interest in certain kinds of information, especially those which concerned the human brain. "I have long believed," he'd written me in his first response to my book, "that here in the end is the writer's best chance, gazing into the synaptic chasm."

Seventy-four years old, he was very frail in those days, even more gaunt and wizened than his photos had led me to expect, but neither age nor frailty interfered with his sense of humor. When I asked him how he was doing one morning at the theatre, he replied with a great display of exhaustion and what I took to be a sly sort of gleam in his eye, "No improvement." Another day, with an almost theatrical sigh, "A little wobbly." How can we be surprised that on the subject of his age he was not only unintimidated but challenged, even inspired? Not five minutes into our first conversation he brought us round to the matter: "I always thought old age would be

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a writer's best chance. Whenever I read the late work of Goethe or W. B. Yeats I had the impertinence to identify with it. Now, my memory's gone, all the old fluency's disappeared. I don't write a single sentence without saying to myself, 'It's a lie!' So I know I was right. It's the best chance I've ever had." Two years later—and older—he explored the same thoughts again in Paris. "It's a paradox, but with old age, the more the possibilities diminish, the better chance you have. With diminished concentration, loss of memory, obscured intelligence—what you, for example, might call 'brain damage'—the more chance there is for saying something closest to what one really is. Even though everything seems inexpressible, there remains the need to express. A child needs to make a sand castle even though it makes no sense. In old age, with only a few grains of sand, one has the greatest possibility." Of course, he knew that this was not a new project for him, only a more extreme version of the one he'd always set himself, what he'd laid out so clearly in his famous line from *The Unnamable*: ". . . it will be the silence, where I am, I don't know, I'll never know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on." It was always here, in "the clash," as he put it to me once, "between can't and must" that he took his stand. "How is it that a man who is completely blind, completely deaf, must see and hear? It's this impossible paradox which interests me. The unseeable, the unbearable, the inexpressible." Such thoughts of course were as familiar to me as they would be to any attentive reader of Beckett, but it was always amazing to hear how passionately—and innocently—he articulated them. Given the pain in his voice, the furrowed, struggling concentration on his face, it was impossible to believe that he wasn't unearthing these thoughts for the first time. Absurd as it sounds, they seemed less familiar to him than to me. And it was no small shock to realize this. To encounter, I mean, the author of some of the greatest work in our language, and find him, at seventy-four, discovering his vision in your presence. His excitement alone was riveting, but for me the greatest shock was to see how intensely he continued to work on the issues that had preoccupied him all his life. So much so that

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it didn't matter where he was or who he was with, whether he was literally "at work" or in a situation that begged for small talk. I don't think I ever had a conversation with him in which I wasn't, at some point, struck by an almost naive realization of his sincerity, as if reminding myself that he was not playing the role one expected him to play, but simply pursuing the questions most important to him. Is it possible that no one surprises us more than someone who is (especially when our expectations have been hyperbolic) exactly what we expect? It was as if a voice in me said, "My God, he's serious!" or, "So he's meant it all along!" And this is where my misunderstandings became somewhat embarrassing. Why on earth should he have surprised me? What did it say of my own sense of writing and reading or the culture from which I'd come that integrity in a writer—for this was after all the simple fact that he was demonstrating—should have struck me as so extraordinary?

Something else he said that first night in London was familiar to me from one of his published interviews, but he said this too as if he'd just come upon it, and hearing it now, I felt that I understood, for the first time, that aspect of his work which interested me the most. I'm speaking of its intimacy and immediacy, the uncanny sense that he's writing not only in a literary but an existential present tense, or more precisely, as John Pilling calls it in his book *Samuel Beckett*, an imperfect tense. The present tense of course is no rare phenomenon in modern, or for that matter, classical fiction, but unlike most writers who write *in* the present, Beckett writes *from* the present and remains constantly vulnerable to it. It is a difference of which he is acutely aware, one which distinguishes him even from a writer he admires as much as he does Kafka. As he said in a 1961 interview, "Kafka's form is classic, it goes on like a steamroller, almost serene. It seems to be threatened all the time, but the consternation is in the form. In my work there is consternation behind the form, not in the form." It is for this reason that Beckett himself is present in his work to a degree that, as I see it, no other writer managed before him. In most of his published conversations, especially when he was younger and not (as later) embarrassed to speak didactically,

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he takes the position that such exposure is central to the work that he considers interesting. "If anything new and exciting is going on today, it is the attempt to let Being into art." As he began to evolve a means by which to accommodate such belief, he made us realize not only the degree to which Being had been kept out of art but *why* it had been kept out, how such exclusion is, even now, the *raison d'être* of most art, and how the game changes, the stakes rising exponentially, once we let it in. Invaded by real time, narrative time acquires an energy and a fragility and, not incidentally, a truth which undermines whatever complacency or passivity the reader—not to mention the writer—has brought to the work, the assumption that enduring forms are to be offered, that certain propositions will rise above the flux, that "pain-killers," which Hamm seeks in vain throughout *Endgame*, will be provided. In effect, the narrative illusion is no longer safe from the narrator's reality. "Being," as he said once, "is constantly putting form in danger," and the essence of his work is its willingness to risk such danger. Listen to the danger he risks in this sentence from *Molloy*: "A and C I never saw again. But perhaps I shall see them again. But shall I be able to recognize them? And am I sure I never saw them again?"

The untrustworthy narrator, of course, had preceded Beckett by at least a couple of centuries, but his "imperfect" tense deprives Molloy of the great conceit that most authors have traditionally granted their narrators—a consistent, dependable memory. In effect, a brain that is neither damaged, in that it doesn't suffer from amnesia, nor normal, in that it is consistent, confident of the information it contains, and immune to the assaults that time and environment mount on its continuities. But Beckett's books are not *about* uncertainty any more than they're *about* consternation. Like their author, like the Being which has invaded them, they are themselves uncertain, not only in their conclusions but their point of view. Form is offered, because as he has so often remarked, that is an obligation before which one is helpless, but any pretense that it will endure is constantly shown to be just that, pretense and nothing more. A game the author can no longer play and

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doesn't dare relinquish. "I know of no form," he said, "that does not violate the nature of Being in the most unbearable manner." Simply stated, what he brought to narrative fiction and drama was a level of reality that dwarfed all others that had preceded it. And because the act of writing—i.e., his own level of reality, at the moment of composition—is never outside his frame of reference, he exposes himself to the reader as no writer has before him. When Molloy changes his mind it's because Beckett has changed his mind as well, when the narrative is inconsistent it's not an esthetic trick but an accurate reflection of the mind from which that narrative springs. Finally, what Molloy doesn't know Beckett doesn't know either. And this is why, though they speak of Joyce or Proust or other masters in terms of genius, so many writers will speak of Beckett in terms of courage. —One almost has to be a writer to know what courage it takes to stand so naked before one's reader or, more important, before oneself, to relinquish the protection offered by separation from the narrative, the security and order which, in all likelihood, were what drew one to writing in the first place.

That evening, speaking of *Molloy* and the work that followed it, he told me that, returning to Dublin after the war, he'd found that his mother had contracted Parkinson's Disease. "Her face was a mask, completely unrecognizable. Looking at her, I had a sudden realization that all the work I'd done before was on the wrong track. I guess you'd have to call it a revelation. Strong word, I know, but so it was. I simply understood that there was no sense adding to the store of information, gathering knowledge. The whole attempt at knowledge, it seemed to me, had come to nothing. It was all haywire. What I had to do was investigate not-knowing, not-perceiving, the whole world of incompleteness." In the wake of this insight, writing in French ("Perhaps because French was not my mother tongue, because I had no facility in it, no spontaneity") while still in his mother's house, he had begun *Molloy* (the first line of which is "I am in my mother's room"), thus commencing what was to be the most prolific period of his life. Within the first three paragraphs of his chronicle, Molloy says "I don't know" six

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times, "perhaps" and "I've forgotten" twice, and "I don't understand" once. He doesn't know how he came to be in his mother's room, and he doesn't know how to write anymore, and he doesn't know why he writes when he manages to do so, and he doesn't know whether his mother was dead when he came to her room or died later, and he doesn't know whether or not he has a son. In other words, he is not an awful lot different from any other writer in the anxiety of composition, considering the alternative roads offered up by his imagination, trying to discern a theme among the chaos of messages offered by his brain, testing his language to see what sort of relief it can offer. Thus, Molloy and his creator are joined from the first, and the latter—unlike most of his colleagues, who have been taught, even if they're writing about their own ignorance and uncertainty, that the strength of their work consists in their ability to say the opposite—is saying "I don't know" with every word he utters. The whole of the narrative is therefore time-dependent, neurologically and psychologically suspect and contingent on the movement of the narrator's mind. And since knowledge, by definition, requires a subject and an object, a knower and a known, two points separated on the temporal continuum, Beckett's "I don't know" has short-circuited the fundamental dualism upon which all narrative, and for that matter, all language, has before him been constructed. If the two points cannot be separated on the continuum, what is left? No time, only the present tense. And if you must speak at this instant, using words which are by definition object-dependent, how do you do so? Finally, what is left to know if knowledge itself has been, at its very root, discredited? Without an object, what will words describe or subjugate? If subject and object are joined, how can there be hope or memory or order? What is hoped for, what is remembered, what is ordered? What is Self if knower and known are not separated by self-consciousness?

Those are the questions that Beckett has dealt with throughout his life. And before we call them esoteric or obtuse, esthetic, philosophical or literary, we'd do well to remember that they're not much different from the questions many

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of us consider, consciously or not, in the course of an ordinary unhysterical day, the questions which, before Molloy and his successors, had been excluded, at least on the surface, from most of the books we read. As Beckett wrote once to Alan Schneider, "The confusion is not my invention. . . It is all around us and our only chance is to let it in. The only chance of renovation is to open our eyes and see the mess . . . There will be new form, and . . . this form will be of such a type that it admits the chaos and does not try to say that it is really something else."

At the time of his visit with his mother, Beckett was thirty-nine years old, which is to say the same age as Krapp, who deals with a similar revelation in his tape-recorded journals and ends (this knowledge, after all, being no more durable than any other) by rejecting it: "What a fool I was to take that for a vision!" That evening, however, as we sat in his hotel room, there was no rejection in Beckett's mind. In the next three years, he told me, he wrote *Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable, Stories and Texts for Nothing*, and—in three months, with almost no revision of the first draft—*Waiting for Godot*. The last, he added, was "pure recreation." The novels, especially *The Unnamable*, had taken him to a point where there were no limits, and *Godot* was a conscious attempt to reestablish them. "I wanted walls I could touch, rules I had to follow." I asked if his revelation—the understanding, as he'd put it, that all his previous work had been a lie—had depressed him. "No, I was very excited! There was no effort in the writing. I worked all day and went out to the cafes at night."

He was visibly excited by the memory, but it wasn't long before his mood shifted, and his excitement gave way to sadness and nostalgia. The contrast between the days he had remembered and the difficulty he was having now—"racking my brains," as he put it, "to see if I can go a little farther"—was all too evident. Sighing loudly, he put his long fingers over his eyes, then shook his head. "If only it could be like that again."

So this is the other side of his equation, one which I, like many of his admirers, have a tendency to forget. The en-

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thusiasm he had but moments before expressed for his diminishments did not protect him from the suffering those diminishments had caused. Let us remember that this is a man who once called writing "disimproving the silence." Why should he miss such futile work when it deserts him? So easy, it is, to become infatuated with the way he embraces his ignorance and absurdity, so hard to remember that when he does so he isn't posturing or for that matter "writing," that what keeps his comedy alive is the pain and despair from which it is won. The sincerity of writers who work with pain and impotence is always threatened by the vitality the work itself engenders, but Beckett has never succumbed to either side of this paradox. He has never, that is to say, put his work ahead of his experience. Unlike so many of us, who found in the Beckett vision—"Nothing is funnier than unhappiness," says Nell in *Endgame*—a comic esthetic which had us, a whole generation of writers, I think, collecting images of absurdity as if mining precious ore, he has gazed with no pleasure whatsoever at the endless parade of light and dark. For all the bleakness of *Endgame*, it remains his belief, as one of the actors who did the play in Germany recalls, that "Hamm says no to nothingness." Exploit absurdity though he does, there is no sign, in his work or his conversation, that he finds life less absurd for having done so. Though he has often said that his real work began when he "gave up hope for meaning," he hates hopelessness and longs for meaning as much as anyone who has never read *Molloy* or seen *Endgame*.

One of our less happy exchanges occurred because of my tendency to forget this. In other words, my tendency to underestimate his integrity. This was three years later, on a cold, rainy morning in Paris, when he was talking, yet again, about the difficulties he was having in his work. "The fact is, I don't know what I'm doing. I can't even bring myself to open the exercise book. My hand goes out to it, then draws back as if on its own." As I say, he often spoke like this, sounding less like a man who'd been writing for sixty years than one who'd just begun, but he was unusually depressed that morning, and the more he talked, the more depressed I became myself. No

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question about it, one had to have a powerful equanimity that his grief might leave it intact. When he was inside his suffering, the force of it spreading out from him could feel like a tidal wave. The more I listened to him that morning, the more it occurred to me that he sounded exactly like Molloy. Who else but Molloy could speak with such authority about paralysis and bewilderment, in other words, a condition absolutely antithetical to authority itself? At first I kept such thoughts to myself, but finally, unable to resist, I passed them along to him, adding excitedly that, if I were forced to choose my favorite of all Beckett lines, it would be Molloy's: "If there's one question I dread, to which I've never been able to invent a satisfactory reply, it's the question, 'What am I doing?'" So complete was my excitement that for a moment I expected him to share it. Why not? It seemed to me that I'd come upon the perfect antidote to his despair in words of his own invention. It took but a single glance from him—the only anger I ever saw in his eyes—to show me how naive I'd been, how silly to think that Molloy's point of view would offer him the giddy freedom it had so often offered me. "Yes," he muttered, "that's my line, isn't it?" Not for Beckett the pleasures of Beckett. As Henry James once said in a somewhat different context: "My job is to write those little things, not read them."

One of the people who hung around rehearsals was a puppeteer who cast his puppets in Beckett plays. At a cast party one night he gave a performance of *Act Without Words* which demonstrated, with particular force, the consistency of Beckett's paradox and the relentlessness with which he maintains it. For those who aren't familiar with it, *Act Without Words* is a silent, almost Keatonesque litany about the futility of hope. A man sits beside a barren tree in what seems to be a desert, a blistering sun overhead. Suddenly, offstage, a whistle is heard and a glass of water descends, but when the man reaches for it, it rises until it's just out of reach. He strains for it, but it rises to elude him once again. Finally he gives up and resumes his position beneath the tree. Almost at once the whistle sounds again, and a stool descends to rekindle his hope. In a flurry of excitement, he mounts, stretches, grasps,

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and watches the water rise beyond his reach again. A succession of whistles and offerings follow, each arousing his hope and dashing it until at last he ceases to respond. The whistle continues to sound but he gives no sign of hearing it. Like so much Beckett, it's the bleakest possible vision rendered in comedy nearly slapstick, and that evening, with the author and a number of children in the audience and an ingenious three-foot-tall puppet in the lead, it had us all, children included, laughing as if Keaton himself were performing it. When the performance ended, Beckett congratulated the puppeteer and his wife, who had assisted him, offering—with his usual diffidence and politeness—but a single criticism. "The whistle isn't shrill enough."

As it happened, the puppeteer's wife was a Buddhist, a follower of the path to which Beckett himself paid homage in his early book on Proust, when he wrote, "the wisdom of all the sages, from Brahma to Leopardi . . . consists not in the satisfaction but the ablation of desire." As a devotee and a Beckett admirer, this woman was understandably anxious to confirm what she, like many people, took to be his sympathies with her religion. In fact, not a few critical opinions had been mustered, over the years, concerning his debt to Buddhism, Taoism, Zen, the Noh theatre, all of it received—as it was now received from the puppeteer's wife—with curiosity and appreciation and absolute denial by the man it presumed to explain. "I know nothing about Buddhism," he said. "If it's present in the play, it is unbeknownst to me." Once this had been asserted, however, there remained the possibility of unconscious predilection, innate Buddhism, so to speak, so the woman had another question, which had stirred in her mind, she said, since the first time she'd seen the play. "When all is said and done, isn't this man, having given up hope, finally liberated?" Beckett looked at her with a pained expression. He'd had his share of drink that night, but not enough to make him forget his vision or push him beyond his profound distaste for hurting anyone's feelings. "Oh, no," he said quietly. "He's *finished*."

I don't want to dwell on it, but I had a personal stake in this

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exchange. For years I'd been studying Zen and its particular form of sitting meditation, and I'd always been struck by the parallels between the practice and Beckett's work. In fact, to me, as to the woman who questioned him that evening, it seemed quite impossible that he didn't have some explicit knowledge, perhaps even direct experience, of Zen, and I had asked him about it that very first night at his hotel. He answered me as he answered her: he knew nothing of Zen at all. Of course, he said, he'd heard Zen stories and loved them for their "concreteness," but other than that he was ignorant on the subject. Ignorant, but not uninterested. "What do you do in such places?" he asked. I told him that mostly we looked at the wall. "Oh," he said, "you don't have to know anything about Zen to do that. I've been doing it for fifty years." (When Hamm asks Clov what he does in his kitchen, Clov replies: "I look at the wall." "The wall!" snaps Hamm. "And what do you see on your wall? . . . naked bodies?" Replies Clov, "I see my light dying.") For all his experience with wall-gazing, however, Beckett found it extraordinary that people would seek it out of their own free will. Why, he asked, did people do it? Were they seeking tranquility? Solutions? And finally, as with neurosurgery: "Does it hurt?" I answered with growing discomfort. Even though I remained convinced that the concerns of his work were identical with those of Zen, there was something embarrassing about discussing it with him, bringing self-consciousness to bear, I mean, where its absence was the point. This is not the place for a discussion of Zen, but since it deals, as Beckett does, with the separation of subject and object ("No direct contact is possible between subject and object," he wrote in his book on Proust, "because they are automatically separated by the subject's consciousness of perception. . ."), the problems of Self, of Being and Non-being, of consciousness and perception, all the means by which one is distanced or removed from the present tense, it finds in Beckett's work a mirror as perfect as any in its own literature or scripture.

This in itself is no great revelation. It's not terribly difficult to find Zen in almost any great work of art. The particular problem, however, what made my questions seem—to me at

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least—especially absurd, is that such points—like many where Beckett is concerned—lose more than they gain in the course of articulation. To point out the Zen in Beckett is to make him seem didactic or, even worse, therapeutic, and nothing could betray his vision more. For that matter, the converse is also true. Remarking the Beckett in Zen betrays Zen to the same extent and for the same reasons. It is there that their true commonality lies, their mutual devotion to the immediate and the concrete, the Truth which becomes less True if made an object of description, *the Being which form excludes*. As Beckett put it once, responding to one of the endless interpretations his work has inspired, "My work is a matter of fundamental sounds. Hamm as stated, Clov as stated . . . That's all I can manage, more than *I* could. If people get headaches among the overtones, they'll have to furnish their own aspirin."

So I did finally give up the questions, and though he always asked me about Zen when we met—"Are you still looking at the wall?"—I don't think he held it against me. His last word on the matter came by mail, and maybe it was the best. In a fit of despair I had written him once about what seemed to me an absolute, insoluble conflict between meditation and writing. "What is it about looking at the wall that makes the writing seem obsolete?" Two weeks later, when I'd almost forgotten my question, I received this reply, which I quote in its entirety:

> Dear Larry, When I start looking at walls, I begin to see the writing. From which even my own is a relief.
>
> As ever,
>
> Sam

Rehearsals lasted three weeks and took place in a cavernous building, once used by the BBC, called the Riverside Studios. Since it was located in a section of London with which I was not familiar, Beckett invited me that first morning to meet him at his hotel and ride out in the taxi he shared with his

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cast. Only three of his actors were present that day—Rick Cluchey, Bud Thorpe, and Alan Mandell, (Hamm and Clov and Nagg respectively)—the fourth, Nell, being Cluchey's wife, Teresita, who was home with their son, Louis Beckett Cluchey, and would come to the theatre in the afternoon. The group had an interesting history, and it owed Beckett a lot more than this production, for which he was taking no pay or royalties. Its origins dated to 1957 when Cluchey, serving a life sentence for kidnapping and robbery at San Quentin, had seen a visiting production of *Waiting for Godot* and found in it an inspiration that had completely transformed his life. Though he'd never been in a theatre—"not even," he said, "to rob one"—he saw to the heart of a play which at the time was baffling more sophisticated audiences. "Who knew more about waiting than people like us?" Within a month of this performance, Cluchey and several other inmates had organized a drama group which developed a Beckett cycle—*Endgame, Waiting for Godot*, and *Krapp's Last Tape*—that they continued, in Europe and the United States, after their parole. Though Cluchey was the only survivor of that original workshop, the present production traced its roots to those days at San Quentin and the support which Beckett had offered the group when word of their work had reached him. Another irony was that Mandell, who was playing Nagg in this production, had appeared with the San Francisco Actor's Workshop in the original production at San Quentin. By now Beckett seemed to regard Rick and Teri and their son, his namesake, as part of his family, and the current production was as much a gift to them as a matter of personal or professional necessity. Not that this was uncharacteristic. In those days much of his work was being done as a gift to specific people. He'd written *A Piece of Monologue* for David Warrilow, and in the next few years he'd write *Rockaby* for Billie Whitelaw and *Ohio Impromptu* for S.E. Gontarski, a professor at Georgia Tech, who was editor of the *Journal of Beckett Studies.* When I met him later in Paris he was struggling to write a promised piece for Cluchey at a time when he had, he said, no interest in work at all. In my opinion, this was not merely because he took no

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promise lightly or because at this point in his life he valued especially this sort of impetus, though both of course were true, but because the old demarcations, between the work and the life, writing and speaking, solitude and social discourse, were no longer available to him. If his ordinary social exchanges were less intense or single-minded than his work it was certainly not apparent to me. I never received a note from him that didn't fit on a 3 × 5 index card, but (as the above-mentioned note on Zen illustrates) there wasn't one, however lighthearted, that wasn't clearly Beckett writing. Obviously, this was not because of any particular intimacy between us, but because, private though he was, and fiercely self-protective, he seemed to approach every chance as if it might be his last. You only had to watch his face when he talked—or wait out one of those two or three minute silences while he pondered a question you'd asked—to know that language was much too costly and precarious for him to use mindlessly or as a means of filling gaps.

Wearing a maroon polo sweater, grey flannel pants, a navy blue jacket, no socks, and brown suede sneaker-like shoes, he was dressed, as Cluchey told me later, much the same as he'd been every time they'd met for the past fifteen years. As the taxi edged through London's morning rush hour, he lit up one of the cheroots he smoked and observed to no one in particular that he was still unhappy with the wheelchair they'd found for Hamm to use in this production. Amazing how often his speech echoed his work. "We need a proper wheelchair!" Hamm cries. "With big wheels. Bicycle wheels!" One evening, when I asked him if he was tired, his answer—theatrically delivered—was a quote from Clov: "'Yes, tired of all our goings on.'" And a few days later, when a transit strike brought London to a standstill, and one of the actors suggested that rehearsals might not go on, he lifted a finger in the air and announced with obvious self-mockery, "Ah, but we must go on!" I'm not sure what sort of wheelchair he wanted but several were tried in the next few days until one was found that he accepted. He was also unhappy with the percussion theme he was trying to establish, two pairs of knocks or scrapes which

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recur throughout the play—when Nagg, for example, knocks on Nell's ashcan to rouse her, when Hamm taps the wall to assure himself of its solidity, or when Clov climbs the two steps of his ladder with four specific scrapes of his slippers. For Beckett, these sounds were a primary musical motif, a fundamental continuity. It was crucial that they echo each other. "Alan," he said, "first thing this morning, I want to rehearse your knock." Most discussions I was to hear about the play were like this, dealing in sound or props or other tangibles, with little or no mention of motivation, and none at all of meaning. Very seldom did anyone question him on intellectual or psychological ground, and when they did, he usually brought the conversation back to the concrete, the specific. When I asked him once about the significance of the ashcans which Nagg and Nell inhabit, he said, "It was the easiest way to get them on and off stage." And when Mandell inquired, that morning in the taxi, about the meaning of the four names in the play—four names which have been subject to all sorts of critical speculation, Beckett explained that Nagg and Clov were from "noggle" and "clou," the German and French for nail, Nell from the English "nail" and Hamm from the English "hammer." Thus, the percussion motif again: a hammer and three nails. Cluchey remembered that when Beckett directed him in Germany in *Krapp's Last Tape* a similar music had been developed around the words "Ah well," which recur four times in the play, and with the sound of Krapp's slippers scraping across the stage. "Sam was obsessed with the sound of the slippers. First we tried sandpapering the soles, then layering them with pieces of metal, then brand new solid leather soles. Finally, still not satisfied, he appeared one day with his own slippers. 'I've been wearing these for twenty years,' he said. 'If they don't do it, nothing will.'" More and more, as rehearsals went on, it would become apparent that music—"The highest art form," he said to me once. "It's never condemned to explicitness"—was his principal referent. His directions to actors were frequently couched in musical terms. "More emphasis there . . . it's a crescendo," or, "The more speed we get here, the more value we'll find in the pause." When Hamm directs Clov to check on

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Nagg in his garbage can—"Go and see did he hear me. Both times."—Beckett said, "Don't play that line realistically. There's music there, you know." As Billie Whitelaw has noted, his hands rose and fell and swept from side to side, forming arcs like a conductor's as he watched his actors and shaped the rhythm of their lines. You could see his lips move, his jaw expanding and contracting, as he mouthed the words they spoke. Finally, his direction, like his texts, seemed a process of reduction, stripping away, reaching for "fundamental sound," transcending meaning, escaping the literary and the conceptual in order to establish a concrete immediate reality, beyond the known, beyond the idea, which the audience would be forced to experience directly, without mediation of intellect.

What Beckett said once of Joyce—"his work *is* not about something. It is something"—was certainly true of this production. The problem, of course, what Beckett's work can neither escape nor forget, is that words are never pure in their concreteness, never free of their referents. To quote Marcel Duchamp, himself a great friend and chess partner of Beckett's, "Everything that man has handled has a tendency to secrete meaning." And such secretion, because he is too honest to deny it, is the other side of Beckett's equation, the counterweight to his music that keeps his work not only meaningful, but (maniacally) inconclusive and symmetrical, its grief and rage always balanced with its comedy, its yearning for expression constantly humbled by its conviction that the Truth can only be betrayed by language. Rest assured that no Beckett character stands on a rug that cannot be pulled out from under him. When Didi seeks solace after Godot has disappointed them again—"We are not saints, but at least we have kept our appointment. How many people can say as much?"—Vladimir wastes no time in restoring him to his futility: "Billions."

But more than anyone else it is Hamm who gets to the heart of the matter, when he cries out to Clov in a fit of dismay, "Clov! We're not beginning to . . . to . . . mean something?"

"Mean something!" Clov cries. "You and I, mean something. Ah that's a good one!"

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"I wonder. If a rational being came back to earth, wouldn't he be liable to get ideas into his head if he observed us long enough? 'Ah good, now I see what it is, yes, now I understand what they're at!' And without going so far as that, we ourselves . . . we ourselves . . . at certain moments . . . to think perhaps it won't all have been for nothing!"

As promised, Nagg's knock was the first order of business after we reached the theatre. This is the point in the play where Nagg has made his second appearance, head rising above the rim of the ashcan with a biscuit in his mouth, while Hamm and Clov—indulging in one of their habitual fencing matches—are discussing their garden ("Did your seeds come up?" "No." "Did you scratch the ground to see if they have sprouted?" "They haven't sprouted." "Perhaps it's too early." "If they were going to sprout they would have sprouted. They'll never sprout!"). A moment later, Clov having made an exit, and Hamm drifted off into a reverie, Nagg leans over to rouse Nell, tapping four times—two pairs—on the lid of her bin. Beckett demonstrated the sound he wanted, using his bony knuckle on the lid, and after Mandell had tried it six or seven times—not "Tap, tap, tap, tap," or "Tap . . . tap . . . tap . . . tap," but "tap, tap . . . tap, tap"—appeared to be satisfied. "Let's work from here," he said. Since Teri had not arrived, he climbed into the can himself and took Nells' part, curling his bony fingers over the edge of the can, edging his head above the rim, and asking, in a shaky falsetto that captured Nell better than anyone I'd ever heard in the part: "What is it, my pet? Time for love?"

As they worked through the scene, I got my first hint of the way in which this *Endgame* would differ from others I'd seen. So much so that, despite the fact that I'd seen six or seven different productions of the play, I would soon be convinced that I'd never seen it before. Certainly, though I'd always thought *Endgame* my favorite play, I realized that I had never really understood it or appreciated the maniacal logic with which it pursues its ambiguities. Here, as elsewhere, Beckett pressed for speed and close to flat enunciation. His principal goal, which he never realized, was to compress the play so that

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it ran in less than ninety minutes. After the above line, the next three were bracketed for speed, then a carefully measured pause established before the next section—three more lines—began. "Kiss me," Nagg begs. "We can't," says Nell. "Try," says Nagg. And then, in another pause, they crane their necks in vain to reach each other from their respective garbage cans. The next section was but a single line in length (Nell: "Why this farce, day after day?"), the next four, the next seven, and so on. Each was a measure, clearly defined, like a jazz riff, subordinated to the rhythm of the whole. Gesture was treated like sound, another form of punctuation. Beckett was absolutely specific about its shape—the manner in which, for example, Nagg and Nell's fingers curled above the rim of their cans—and where it occurred in the text. "Keep these gestures small," he said to Cluchey, when they reached a later monologue. "Save the big one for 'All that loveliness!'" He wanted the dialogue crisp and precise but not too realistic. It seemed to me he yearned to stylize the play as much as possible, underline its theatricality, so that the actors, as in most of his plays, would be seen as clearly acting, clearly playing the roles they're doomed to play forever. The text, of course, supports such artifice, the actors often addressing each other in language which reminds us that they're on stage. "That's an aside, fool," says Hamm to Clov. "Have you never heard an aside before?" Or Clov, after his last soliloquy, pausing at the edge of the stage: "This is what they call . . . making an exit." Despite this, Beckett wanted theatrical flourish kept to a minimum. It seemed to me that he stiffened the movement, carving it like a sculptor, stripping it of anything superfluous or superficial. "Less color please," he said to Alan while they were doing Nagg and Nell together, "if we keep it flat, they'll get it better." And later, to Thorpe: "Bud, you don't have to move so much. Only the upper torso. Don't worry. They'll get it. Remember: you don't even want to be out here. You'd rather be alone, in your kitchen."

Though the play was thirty years old for him, and he believed that his memory had deteriorated, his memory of the script was flawless and his alertness to its detail unwavering.

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"That's not 'upon.' It's 'on.'" He corrected "one week" with "a week," "crawlin'" with "crawling." When Cluchey said to Thorpe, "Cover me with a sheet," Beckett snapped: "*The* sheet, Rick, *the* sheet." And when Clov delivered the line, "There are no more navigators," he corrected, "There's a pause before navigators." He made changes as they went along—"On 'Good God' let's leave out the 'good'"—sometimes cutting whole sections, but had no interest in publishing a revised version of the play. For all the fact that he was "wobbly," he seemed stronger than anyone else on the set, rarely sitting while he worked and never losing his concentration. As so many actors and actresses have noted, he delivered his own lines better than anyone else, and this was his principal mode of direction. When dealing with certain particular lines, he often turned away from the cast and stood at the edge of the stage, facing the wall, working out gestures in pantomime. For those of us who were watching rehearsals, it was no small thing to see him go off like this and then hear him, when he'd got what he wanted, deliver his own lines in his mellifluous Irish pronunciation, his voice, for all its softness, projecting with force to the seats at the back of the theatre:

> "'They said to me, That's love, yes, yes, not a doubt, now you see how easy it is. They said to me, That's friendship, yes, yes, no question, you've found it. They said to me, Here's the place, stop, raise your head and look at all that beauty. That order! They said to me, Come now, you're not a brute beast, think upon these things and you'll see how all becomes clear. And simple! They said to me, What skilled attention they get, all these dying of their wounds.'"

To say the least, such moments produced an uncanny resonance. Unself-conscious, perfectly in character, one felt that he was not only reading the lines but writing them, discovering them now as he'd discovered them thirty years before. That we, as audience, had somehow become his first witness, present at the birth of his articulations. If his own present tense—the act of writing—had always been his subject, what could be more natural or inevitable than showing us this, the

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thoughts and meaning "secreted" and rejected, the words giving form, the form dissolving in the silence that ensued. For that was the message one finally took from such recitations, the elusiveness of the meanings he had established, the sense of the play as aging with him, unable to arrest the flow of time and absolutely resolved against pretending otherwise. Why should Hamm and Clov be spared the awareness of Molloy: "It is in the tranquility of decomposition that I remember the long confused emotion which was my life."

Perhaps it was for this reason, that he was never far removed from what he'd written, that if an actor inquired about a line, his answers could seem almost naive. When Cluchey asked him why Hamm, after begging Clov to give him his stuffed dog, throws it to the ground, Beckett explained, "He doesn't like the feel of it." And when he was asked for help in delivering the line "I'll tell you the combination of the larder if you promise to finish me," he advised, "Just think, you'll tell him the combination if he'll promise to kill you." Despite—or because of—such responses, all four members of the cast would later describe the experience of his direction in language that was often explicitly spiritual. "What he offered me," said Cluchey, "was a standard of absolute authority. He gave my life a spiritual quotient." And Thorpe: "When we rehearsed, the concentration was so deep that I lost all sense of myself. I felt completely empty, like a skeleton, the words coming through me without thought of the script. I'm not a religious person, but it seemed a religious experience to me. Why? Maybe because it was order carried to its ultimate possibility. If you lost your concentration, veered off track for any reason, it was as if you'd sinned." Extreme though such descriptions are, I doubt that anyone who watched these rehearsals would find in them the least trace of exaggeration. More than intense, the atmosphere was almost unbearably internalized, self-contained to the point of circularity. In part, obviously, this was because we were watching an author work on his own text. In addition to this, however, the text itself—because *Endgame* is finally nothing but theatre, repetition, a series of ritualized games that the actors are doomed to play forever—was pre-

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cisely about the work that we were watching. When Clov asks Hamm, "What keeps me here?" Hamm replies, "The dialogue." Or earlier, when Hamm is asking him about his father, "You've asked me these questions millions of times." Says Hamm, "I love the old questions . . . ah, the old questions, the old answers, there's nothing like them!" If the play is finally about nothing but itself, the opportunity to see it repeated, again and again for two weeks, offered a chance to see Beckett's intention realized on a scale at once profound and literal, charged with energy but at the same time boring, deadening, infuriating. (A fact of which Beckett was hardly unaware. While they were working on the line, "This is not much fun," he advised Cluchey, "I think it would be dangerous to have any pause after that line. We don't want to give people time to agree with you.") To use his own percussion metaphor, watching these rehearsals was to offer one's head up for *Endgame*'s cadence to be hammered into it. Finally, after two weeks of rehearsal, the play became musical to a hypnotic extent, less a theatrical than a meditative experience in that one could not ascribe to it any meaning or intention beyond its own concrete and immediate reality. In effect, the more one saw of it, the less it contained. To this day the lines appear in my mind without reason, like dreams or memory-traces, but the play itself, when I saw it in Dublin, seemed an anticlimax, the goal itself insignificant beside the process that had produced it. If *Waiting for Godot* is, as Vivian Mercier has written, "a play in which nothing happens, twice," it might be said of *Endgame* that it is an endless rehearsal for an opening night that never comes. And therefore that its true realization was the rehearsals we saw rather than its formal production later in Dublin. Could this be why, one reason at least, Beckett did not accompany his cast to Ireland or, for that matter, why he has never attended his own plays in the theatre?

He left London the day after rehearsals ended, and I did not see him again until the following spring in Paris. At our first meeting, he seemed a totally different person, distant and inaccessible, physically depleted, extremely thin, his eyes more deeply set and his face more heavily lined than ever. He spoke

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from such distance and with such difficulty that I was reminded again of Molloy, who describes conversation as "unspeakably painful," explaining that he hears words "a first time, then a second, and often even a third, as pure sounds, free of all meaning." We met in the coffee shop of a new hotel, one of those massive gray skyscrapers that in recent years have so disfigured the Paris skyline. Not far from his apartment, it was his favorite meeting place because it offered a perfect anonymity. He wasn't recognized during this or any subsequent meeting I had with him there. Early on in our conversation, I got a taste of his ferocious self-protection, which was much more pronounced here, of course, where he lived, than it had been in London. "How long will you be here?" he said. "Three weeks," I said. "Good," he said. "I want to see you *once* more." Given his politeness, it was easy to forget how impossible his life would have been had he not been disciplined about his schedule, how many people must have sought him out as I had sought him out myself. What was always amazing to me was how skillful he was in letting one know, where one ranked in his priorities. Couching his decision in courtesy and gentleness, he seemed totally vulnerable, almost passive, but his softness masked a relentless will and determination. He left one so disarmed that it was difficult to ask anything of him, much less seek more time than he had offered. Though he promptly answered every letter I wrote him, it was three years before he gave me his home address, so that I would not have to write him in care of his publisher, and he has never given me a phone number, always arranging that he will call me when I come to town. Why not? Rick Cluchey told me that whenever Beckett went to Germany a documentary film crew followed him around without his permission, using a telephoto lens to film him from a distance.

As it turned out, however, there was another reason for his distance now. In London, the only unpleasant moment between us had occurred when, caught up in the excitement of rehearsals, I'd asked if I could write about him. Though his refusal, again, had been polite ("Unless of course you want to write about the work. . .") and I had expressed considerable

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regret about asking him, it would soon become clear that he had not forgotten. Even if he had, the speed with which I was firing questions at him now, nervously pressing all the issues I had accumulated since I'd seen him last, would have put him on his guard. Beckett is legendary, of course, for his hatred of interviews, his careful avoidance of media and its invasions (*The Paris Review* has tried for years, with no success, to interview him for its "Writers at Work" series), and the next time we met, he made it clear that before we continued he must know what I was after. "Listen, I've got to get this off my chest. You're not interviewing me, are you?"

We had just sat down at a restaurant to which he had invited me. The only restaurant he ever frequented, it was a classic bistro on the edge of Montparnasse where he kept his own wine in the cellar and the waiters knew his habits so well that they always took him to the same table and brought him, without his having to order, the dish he ate—filet of sole and french fries—whenever he went there. Though I had my notebook in my pocket and upon leaving him would, as always, rush to take down everything I could remember about our conversation, I assured him that I was certainly not interviewing him and had no intention of writing about him. At this point in time, there was nothing but truth in my disclaimer. (And I might add that he obviously trusted me on this score, since he gave me permission to publish this article, and as far as I can see, has never held it against me.) Since I was not yet even dimly conscious of the ambiguous, somewhat belligerent forces that led to this memoir, the notes I took were for myself alone, as I saw it, a result of the emotion I felt when I left him and the impulse, common if not entirely handsome in a writer, to preserve what had transpired between us. Taking me at my word, Beckett relaxed, poured the wine, and watched with pleasure as I ate while he picked at his food like a child who hated the dinner table. "You're not hungry?" I said. "No," he said. "I guess I'm not too interested in food anymore." And later, when I asked if he'd ever eaten in any of the Japanese restaurants that were just beginning to open in Paris: "No. But I hear they make good rice."

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Considering how thin he was, I wasn't surprised to hear that the desire for food—like almost all other desires, I believe, except those which involved his work—was a matter of indifference to him. What did surprise me, as the wine allowed us to speak of things more commonplace, was the view of his domestic situation—evenings at home with his wife, and such—which emerged during the course of the evening. He told me that he'd been married for forty years, that he and his wife had had just two addresses during all their time in Paris, that it had sometimes been difficult for them—"many near-ruptures, as a matter of fact"—but that the marriage had grown easier as they'd got older. "Of course," he added, "I do have my own door." Since I'd always thought of him as the ultimate solitary, isolated as Krapp and as cynical about sex as Molloy, I confessed that I couldn't imagine him in a situation so connubial. "Why should you find it difficult?" he said with some surprise. In fact, he seemed rather pleased with his marriage, extremely grateful that it had lasted. It was one more correction for me, and more important, I think, one more illustration of the symmetry and tension, the dialectic he maintains between his various dichotomies. Just as "can't" and "must" persist with equal force in his mind, the limitations of language no more deniable than the urgent need to articulate, the extreme loneliness which he's explored throughout his life—the utter skepticism and despair about relationships in general and sexuality in particular—has had as its counterpoint a marriage which has lasted forty years. But lest one suspect that the continuity and comfort of marriage had tilted the scales so far that the dream of succession had taken root in his mind, "No," he replied, when I asked if he'd ever wanted children, "that's one thing I'm proud of."

For all my conviction that I did not intend to write about him, I always felt a certain amount of shame when I took up my notebook after I left him. For that matter, I am not entirely without shame about what I'm writing now. One does not transcribe a man like Beckett without its feeling like a betrayal. What makes me persist? More than anything, I believe, it is something I began to realize after our meetings in Paris—that

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the shame I felt in relation to him had not begun with my furtive attempts to preserve him in my notebook, but rather had been a constant in our relationship long before I'd met him. To put it simply, it began to strike me that Beckett had been, since the moment I discovered *Molloy*, as much a source of inhibition as inspiration. For all the pleasure it had given me, my first reading of the trilogy had almost paralyzed me (as indeed it had paralyzed any number of other writers I knew), leaving me traumatized with shame and embarrassment about my own work. It wasn't merely that, in contrast to his, my language seemed inauthentic and ephemeral, but that he made the usual narrative games—the insulated past tense, the omniscient narrator, form which excluded reference to itself, biographical information—seem, as he put it in *Watt*, "solution clapped on problem like a snuffer on a candle." More than any other writer I knew, Beckett's work seemed to point to that which lay beyond it. It was as if, though its means were Relative, its goals were Absolute, its characters beyond time precisely because (again and again) they seemed to age before our eyes. And such accomplishment was not, it seemed to me, simply a matter of talent or genius but of a totally different approach to writing, a connection between his life and his work which I could covet but never achieve. It was this union—the joining, if you like, of "being" and "form"—that I envied in him and that caused me finally to feel that the very thought of Beckett, not to mention the presence of one of his sentences in my mind, made writing impossible. And once again: it was not merely a matter of talent. I could read Joyce or Proust or Faulkner without such problems, and I had no lack of appreciation for them. It was just that they were clearly *writers*, while Beckett was something else, a sort of meta-writer who, even as he wrote, transcended the act of writing.

Oddly enough, if there was anyone else I knew who stood in such relation to his work, it was Muhammad Ali, who seemed to laugh at boxing even as he took it to higher levels of perfection, who not only defeated but humiliated his opponents, establishing such possession of their minds that he won many fights before the first round began, because he stood

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outside the game in which his adversary was enclosed. One cannot play a game unless one believes in it, but Ali managed such belief without the attachment to which it usually leads. Say that he found the cusp that separates belief from attachment, concentration from fixation, and on the other hand, play from frivolity, spontaneity from formlessness. And it seems to me that Beckett has done the same. No writer has lived who took language more seriously, but none has been more eloquent about its limitations and absurdities. Like Ali, he shows us where we are imprisoned. The danger is that, in doing so, he will imprison us in his example. If some fighters tried, playing the clown, to imitate Ali, and ended by making fools of themselves in addition to being defeated, writers with Beckett too much in mind can sound worse than the weakest student in a freshman writing class. After reading Joyce or Proust, one can feel embarrassed about one's lack of music or intelligence, but in the wake of one of Beckett's convoluted, self-mocking sentences, one can freeze with horror at the thought of any form that suggests "Once upon a time," anything in fact which departs from the absolute present. But if you take that too far you lose your work in the ultimate swamp, the belief that you can capture both your subject and your object in the instant of composition: "Here I am, sitting at my desk, writing 'Here I am, sitting at my desk.'"

None of this of course is historically unprecedented. Every generation of artists has to do battle with its predecessors, and each such battle has its own unique configurations. What made it so vivid for me was that now, twenty years after that first reading, his presence affected me much as his work had. Happy though I felt to see him, however amazing I found our time together, I always left him with an acute sense that I'd come up short, failed him somehow, as if the moment had passed before I had awakened to it. As if my conversational and psychological habits had stood between us. Or more to the point, as if the *form* of my social habit had violated the nature of his *Being* in much the same way that literary form, as he'd concluded years before, violated the being it excluded. Sitting across from me in the cafe, his eyes fierce in their con-

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centration, his silence so completely unapologetic, he seemed to occupy, according to my reverential opinion, a present tense—*this* space, *this* moment in time—which I could merely observe from afar. Despite—no, because of—his humility, his uncertainty, the "impotence" which, as he'd once put it, his work had set out to "exploit,"* he manifested for me, as for years he had for Rick Cluchey, a kind of ultimate authority, a sense of knowledge very near to Absolute. Neither egoism nor self-confidence—the opposite, in fact, of both—such knowledge seemed a by-product of suffering, the pain that was so evident on his face, an earned if not entirely welcome result of having explored and survived an emptiness that people of less courage, if they acknowledged it at all, considered by means of intellect alone.

Exaggerated and romantic though all this seems, I'm sure it's not entirely unjustified. Beckett is indeed an extraordinary being, a man who has travelled in realms that most people don't want to hear about, much less explore. A true writer, an artist who pursues his vision so courageously and with such disregard for easy gratification that his work becomes, in the purest sense, a spiritual practice. What my responses showed, however, my idealization of him and the self-criticism it evoked, was that such authority was nothing if not a hazardous experience. Like all great wisdom, it could bring out the best or the worst in you, challenge or intimidate you, toughen you or make you self-effacing. Finally, if you were a writer, it could inspire you to listen to your own voice or trap you into years of imitating his. Like Joyce or Proust, or for that matter, any other great artist one adopts as a teacher, Beckett is an almost impossible act to follow, but more so than most, I think, because his work is so subjective, so seductive in the permissions it grants, because his apparent freedom from plot and character and his first person present tense can draw you into a

* "The kind of work I do," he explained to Israel Schenker in a *New York Times* interview in 1966, before he'd closed the door to media, "is one in which I'm not master of my material. The more Joyce knew the more he could. He's tending toward omniscience and omnipotence as an artist. I'm working with impotence, ignorance. I don't think impotence has been exploited in the past."

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swamp in which art and self-indulgence begin to seem identical. It is so easy to think that he opens the gates for anything you're feeling or thinking at the moment you sit down at your desk. How many writers could I count who had books like mine, the one I'd shown him, the one he'd criticized because the voice was "not believable," which would not be written until the Beckett had been removed from them? The great irony is that, for all his rejection of authority and knowledge—precisely because of such rejection, in fact—Beckett is almost too much an authority, he knows too much that one must discover on one's own. If you aren't to go on imitating him, you either face the fact that there is nothing you really need to say and find yourself another vocation, or you dig for something truer in yourself, something you don't know, at the bottom of all you do. In other words, you start where he started, after meeting his mother in Dublin. The trouble is that, since most of such digging, if you're an ordinary mortal, is surely doomed to fail, it can seem as if he's taken you out of the game you're capable of playing and signed you up in one for which you've neither the courage, the talent, nor the appetite. Finally, his greatest danger—and his greatest gift—may be his simple reminder that writing is not about reiteration.

But of course there is also the other side to it, one which has explicitly to do with the nature of his vision, the "being" he allows into the work, the void he's faced, the negation he's endured, the grief he's not only experienced but transformed with his imagination. "Yes, the confusion of my ideas on the subject of death," says Molloy, "was such that I sometimes wondered, believe me or not, if it wasn't a state of being even worse than life. So I found it natural not to rush into it and, when I forgot myself to the point of trying, to stop in time." Once we'd got over our laughter and exhilaration, how were we to deal with such a statement? For Beckett, such negation had fueled the work, but for many who presumed to be his successors, it had often become an easy, a facile nihilism, less a game you lost than one you refused to play. Indeed, for some of us, true disciples, it could become one you were ashamed to play. As if, having finally been enlightened as to the absurdity of

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life, you were too wise to persist at its illusions, too wise to allow enthusiasm, occupy space, to feed the body you knew to be disintegrating. In effect, if you misread him well enough, Beckett could turn you into a sort of literary anorexic, make you too cool or hip, too scared, too detached and disenchanted, to take, by writing, the only food that nourished you. But the irony is that he himself, as he'd shown me in London, in our very first conversation, is anything but anorexic. That's obvious, isn't it? This man who writes, in *Molloy*, "you would do better, at least no worse, to obliterate texts than to blacken margins, to fill in the holes of words till all is blank and flat and the whole ghastly business looks like what it is, senseless, speechless, issueless misery," has published six novels and fourteen plays during his lifetime, not to mention a great body of short prose, poetry, criticism, a number of television and radio plays, and a filmscript. Just fifteen pages later in *Molloy* he writes, "Not to want to say, not to know what you want to say, and never to stop saying, or hardly ever, that is the thing to keep in mind, even in the heat of composition." Much as he can recognize the tyranny of hope or meaning, he cannot deny that there is hope and meaning within such recognition, and he cannot pretend that this hope and meaning is any less exciting or more enduring than the others. It's all part of the equation, however absurd, of being alive, and he's never rejected that condition for its alternative. After all, when Nell says "Nothing's funnier than unhappiness," we laugh at that statement, and—if only for an instant—are less unhappy as we do so. In a sense Beckett is the great poet of negation, but what is poetry for him can easily become, if we use him incorrectly, if we make him too much an authority or if we underestimate the integrity of his paradox, a negation so extreme and absolute that it threatens the very source of one's energy and strength.

Of course, it's not easy to speak of these things. It's always possible that his greatest gift, not only to those of us he's challenged, but the readers we might have enlisted, is the silence toward which he's pressed us. If you can't accept his example, and allow Being into your work, why add your lies to the ocean

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of print which is drowning the world already? In my opinion, most writers deal with his challenge in one of two ways. Either they ignore his example, go on—as I had, for example, in writing journalism—making forms that exclude Being, accepting the role of explainer, describer, or they try—as I was trying with my novel—to play his game despite the astronomical odds against any possibility of success. For those who take the latter path, the entry of Being into the form often means the entry of self-consciousness, writing about writing about writing. Too late we discover that Beckett, Molloy, Malone, *et al*, though they may be mad, haven't a trace of neurosis or narcissism about them, that their present tense is shaped and objectified by an inherently classical, concrete mind, a sense of self which differs radically from our own. In effect, that the present tense which becomes, inevitably, an imperfect tense for them, remains a merely present—a merely reductive, a totally self-absorbed—tense for us. If you can't take the leap from present to imperfect, you remain rooted in the present. An honorable intention, of course, but if you're honest about it, you have to admit that writing and being in the present are not necessarily compatible, that in fact you're always flirting with contradiction and dishonesty. Tantalized by what amounts to a desire to write and not-write simultaneously, you may be equally loyal to form and being, but you may also be a mother who would keep her child forever in her womb. It's the sort of game in which defeat can lead to farce that's not only hypocritical but blasphemous toward the master one has pretended to revere.

These are just a few of the reasons, I think, I took notes when I left him, and despite my disclaimer, am writing about him now. Why? Perhaps because Beckett himself, as I said earlier, freed me from the Beckett myth. Not entirely for sure, but enough at least to help me resume a voice that differed from the one he once inspired in me. Not for nothing did he show me that he enjoyed my journalism. "Look here, Larry," he said to me once in London, "your line is witnessing." By which I understand him to have meant: take your object and

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be done with it. Be content to write what you know without acknowledging every moment that you don't. So here I am, witnessing him. Maybe this is all just rationalization, but getting him down like this may be the best homage and the best revenge, the only weapon I have against the attack he mounted on my mind. I can't forget him, and I can't think of anything else to do with his example but reject it. Just as Buddhists say about their own ultimate authority, "If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him," I say of Beckett that a writer can only proceed from him by recognizing that he is now, having taken his work to all of its ultimate conclusions, utterly emptied of possibility. As Hamm says, "All is absolute. The bigger a man is, the fuller he is . . . and the emptier."

The next time we saw each other, a year later in Paris, our conversation continued, where it had begun and where it had been left, with the difficulties of writing. Because my work (the same novel) was going as badly as his, there wasn't a whole lot of joy in the air. For a moment, in fact, it became a sort of sparring match between us, agony versus agony, but then, remembering whom I was in the ring with and how much he outweighed me, I backed off. "It's not a good time at all," he sighed, "I walk the streets trying to see what's in my mind. It's all confusion. Life is all confusion. A blizzard. It must be like this for the newborn. Not much difference I think between this blizzard and that. Between the two, what do you have? Wind machines or some such. I can't write anything, but I must." He paused a moment, then suddenly brightened, once again repeating a famous Beckett line as if he'd just come upon it, "Yes, that's it! Can't and must! That's my situation!"

He spoke of a sentence that haunted him. "It won't go away, and it won't go farther: 'One night, as he sat, with his head on his hands, he saw himself rise, and go.'" Except for this, however, there was nothing. "It's like the situation I spoke of in my book on Proust. 'Not just hope is gone, but desire.'" When I reminded him—quoting the line I mentioned earlier ("The wisdom of all the sages . . . consists not in the satisfaction but the ablation of desire.")—that according to the book he'd remembered, the loss of desire was not an entirely unwel-

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come development, he replied, "Well, yes, but the writing was the only thing that made life bearable." Sighing as if in tremendous pain, he seemed to drift off for a moment. "Funny to complain about silence when one has aspired to it for so long. Words are the only thing for me and there's not enough of them. Now, it's as if I'm just living in a void, waiting. Even my country house is lonely when I'm not writing."

Occasionally, when he talked like this, there was an odd sense, absurd as it seems, that he was asking for help, even perhaps advice, but this time was different. Now seventy-eight years old, he appeared to have reached a sort of bottom-line exhaustion. He seemed smaller to me, the lines in his forehead more deeply etched, like a grid. Every gesture seemed difficult, every word a struggle. His blue eyes were shy, gentle, youthful as ever, but incredibly pained and sorrowful. I told him that sometimes I found it amazing that he went on. "Yes," he replied, "often I think it's time I put an end to it. That's all through the new work. But then again . . . there are also times when I think, maybe it's time to begin." He said there had always been so much more in the work than he'd suspected was there, and then added, in what seemed an almost unconscious afterthought, a phrase I've never forgotten, which may have summed up his work as well or better than any other: "Ambiguities infirmed as they're put down. . ."

"Which is more painful," I asked him, "writing or not writing?"

"They're both painful, but the pain is different."

He spoke a little about the different sorts of pain—the pain of being unable to write, the pain of writing itself, and—as bad as any—the pain of finishing what he'd begun. I said, "If the work is so painful when one does it and so painful when it's done, why on earth does anyone do it?"

This was one of those questions that caused him, as I've mentioned already, to disappear behind his hand, covering his eyes and bending his head toward the table for what must have been two full minutes. Then, just when I'd begun to suspect that he'd fallen asleep, he raised his head and, with an air of relief, as if he'd finally resolved a lifelong dilemma, whispered,

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"The fashioning, that's what it is for me, I think. The pleasure in making a satisfactory object." He explained that the main excitement in writing had always been technical for him, a combination of "metaphysics and technique." "A problem is there and I have to solve it. *Godot*, for example, began with an image—of a tree and an empty stage—and proceeded from there. That's why, when people ask me who Godot is, I can't tell them. It's all gone."

"Why metaphysics?" I said.

"Because," he said, "you've got your own experience. You've got to draw on that."

He tried to describe the work he wanted to do now. "It has to do with a fugitive 'I' [or perhaps he meant 'eye']. It's an embarrassment of pronouns. I'm searching for the non-pronounial."

"'Non-pronounial'?"

"Yes. It seems a betrayal to say 'he' or 'she.' "

The problem of pronouns, first person versus third, which had been so much explored and illuminated throughout his work, was also the one he addressed in mine. That morning, as always, he was extremely solicitous, asking me question after question about the progress of my novel. Though the book continued to defy me, so much so that I'd begun to wonder if brain damage, as I wanted to approach it, might not be beyond the limits of art, he seemed to know exactly what I wanted to do. It wasn't surprising, of course, that the man who'd once described tears as "liquified brain" should be familiar with the subject of brain damage, but his questions were so explicit that it was difficult to believe that he hadn't considered, and rejected, the very book I wanted to write. The chapters I'd shown him in London had been written in the first person, which he had considered a mistake. "I know it's impertinent to say this, please forgive me . . . but this book, in my opinion, will never work in the first person." When I told him, here at the cafe, that I had now moved it to the third person, he nodded, but he knew that problems of point of view were never resolved with pronouns alone. "Still," he said, returning

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to the point he'd made when we met in London, "you need a witness, right?"

He excused himself from the table—"pardon my bladder"—but when he returned it was clear that he'd taken my book with him. "Well, do you see the end of it?"

"No," I said, "not at all."

He sighed. "It's really very difficult, isn't it?"

He sipped his coffee, then homed in on the principal issue in my book as in so much contemporary fiction—the need for objectivity and knowledge in conjunction with the need for the intimacy and immediacy of a naked subjectivity. "You need a witness and you need the first person, that's the problem, isn't it? One thing that might help . . . you might have a look at an early book of mine, perhaps you know it, *Mercier and Camier*. I had a similar problem there. It begins, 'I know what happened with Mercier and Camier because I was there with them all the time.'"

After I returned from Paris, I looked at *Mercier and Camier* again but found no place for his solution in the problems I had set myself. Still, I wrote an entire version of my novel in the third person, and I can say without a doubt that there were very few days I didn't feel him looking over my shoulder, whispering, "It's really very difficult, isn't it?" or when things were going worse, commenting on me as Nagg comments on Hamm, "What does that mean? That means nothing!" Halfway through, I knew it wasn't working, suspecting strongly that my only hope, despite what Beckett had said, was in the first person, but I pushed on. Certainly, it wasn't merely his recommendation that kept me going in that direction, but how can I pretend it didn't matter? When finally—a year and a half and an entire manuscript later—I turned it around and started over, in the first person, I could not, though I wrote him more than one letter about the book, bring myself to mention it to him. To my mind, the book worked, not only because it was in the first person, but because I had finally succeeded in weaning myself from him. Given all this, I felt no small trepidation when I sent him the manuscript but, as be-

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fore, he read the book at once and replied with generosity and enthusiasm. There was no sign of his original disappointment and none of his position *vis-à-vis* my point of view. His note, as always, was confined to a 3 × 5 index card, and his scrawl, which had grown progressively worse in the years that I'd corresponded with him, was not completely legible. To my chagrin, in fact, its most important sentence was only half-accessible to me. After offering his compliments and appreciation, he concluded with a sentence that drifted off into a hopeless hieroglyphics after beginning with "And on with you now from. . ."

After "from" was a word which looked like "this," but might have been "thus" or "phis," a word which looked like "new" but might have been "man" or "ran," a word which looked like "thought" or "bought" or "sought," and finally a word which looked like "anew." "And on with you now from this new thought anew"? It didn't sound like Beckett at all. I asked several friends to have a look but none could read his writing any better than I. What absurd apocryphy that a note from Beckett should conclude, "And on with you now from [illegible] [illegible] [illegible]." Finally, unable to stand it any longer, I wrote to ask if, by some chance (after all, more than three weeks had passed since he'd written the note) he could remember what he'd written. Again he answered promptly, ending our dialogue, as I will end this memoir, with a note that was characteristic, not only in its economy and content, but in what it says about his (failing?) memory and the attitude with which he approached his correspondence:

Dear Larry,

I believe I wrote, 'And on with you now from this new nought anew.'

As ever,

Sam.

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Portfolio

Door
Window
Table
Basket
Mirror
Rug

Richard Artschwager

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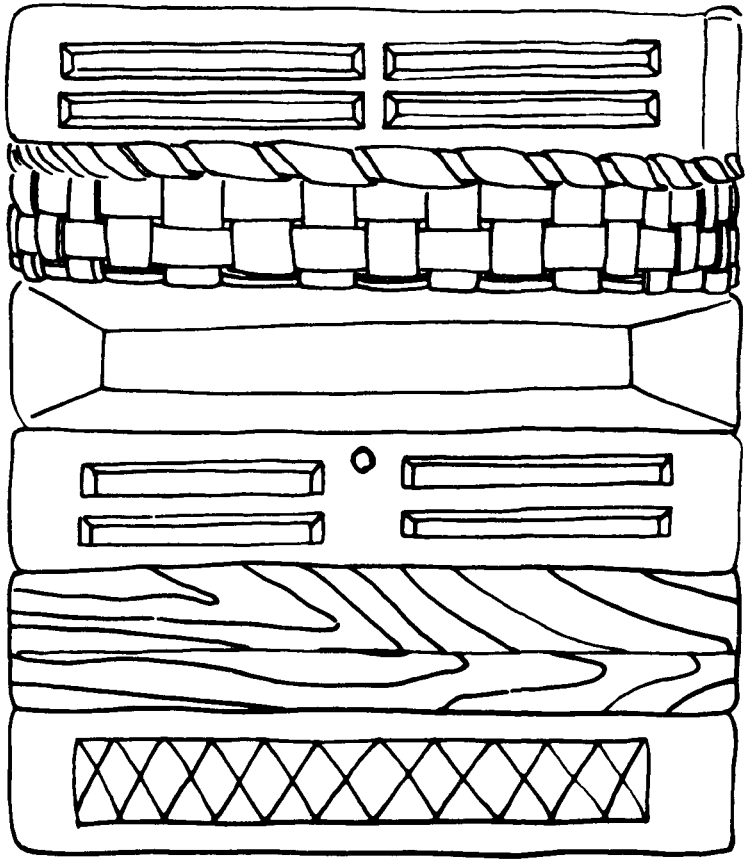

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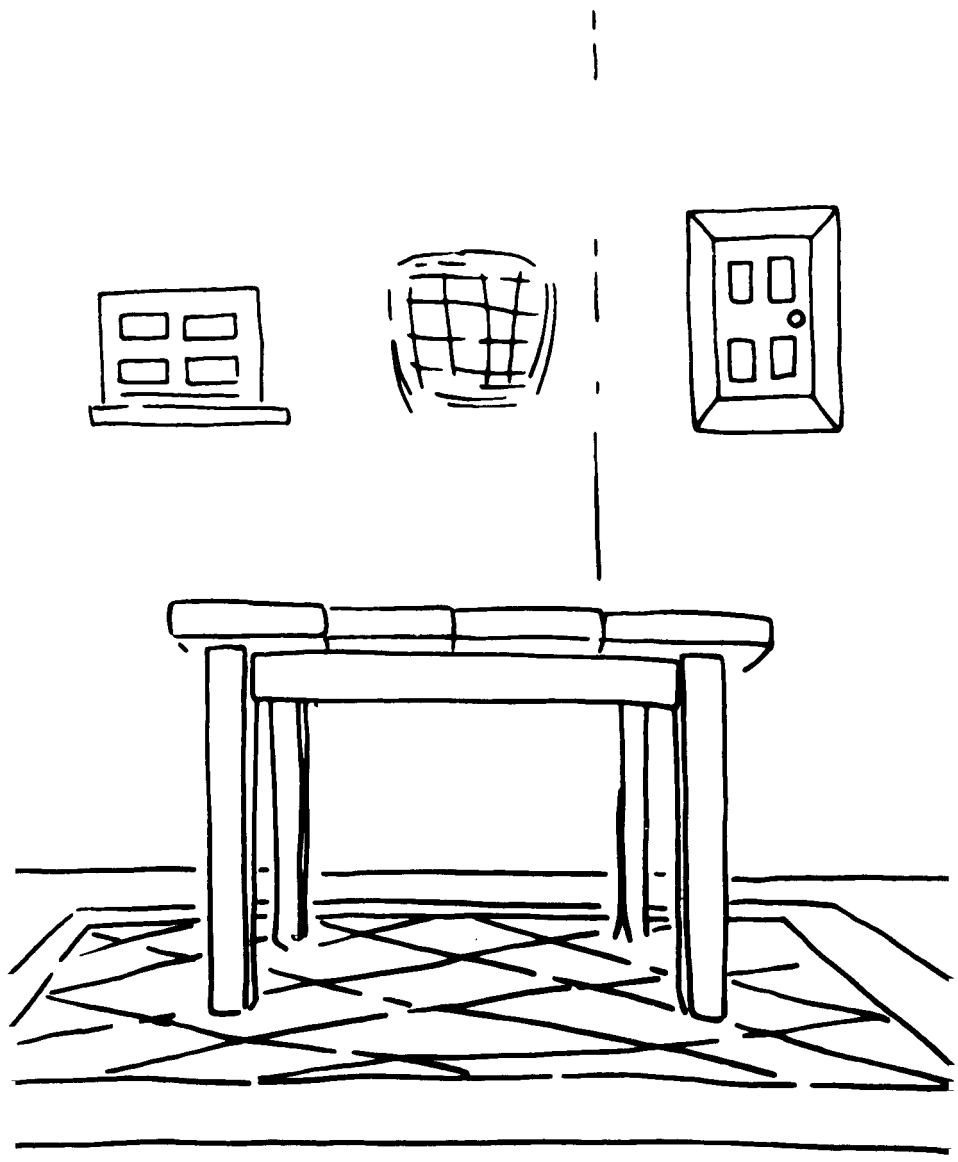

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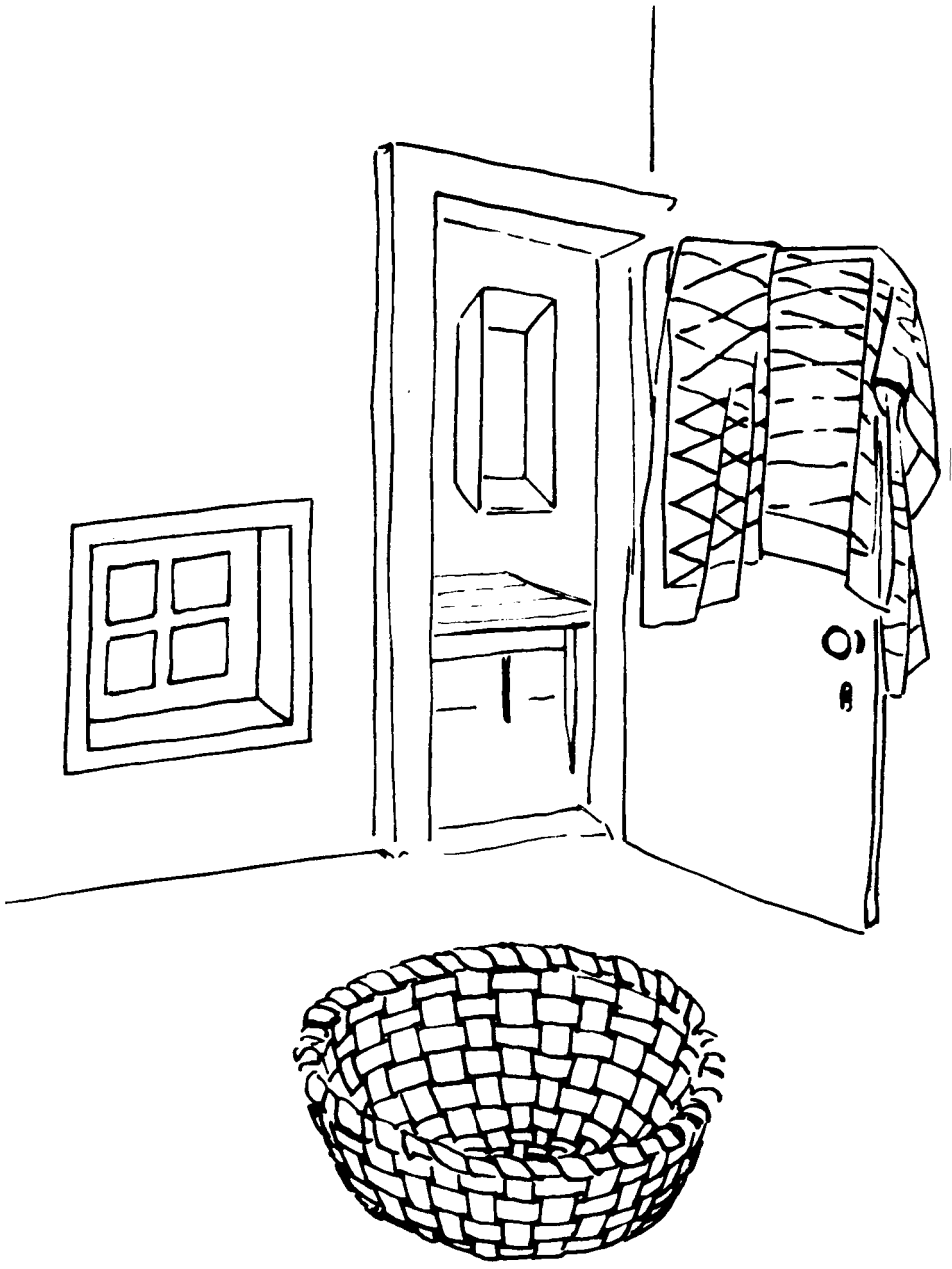

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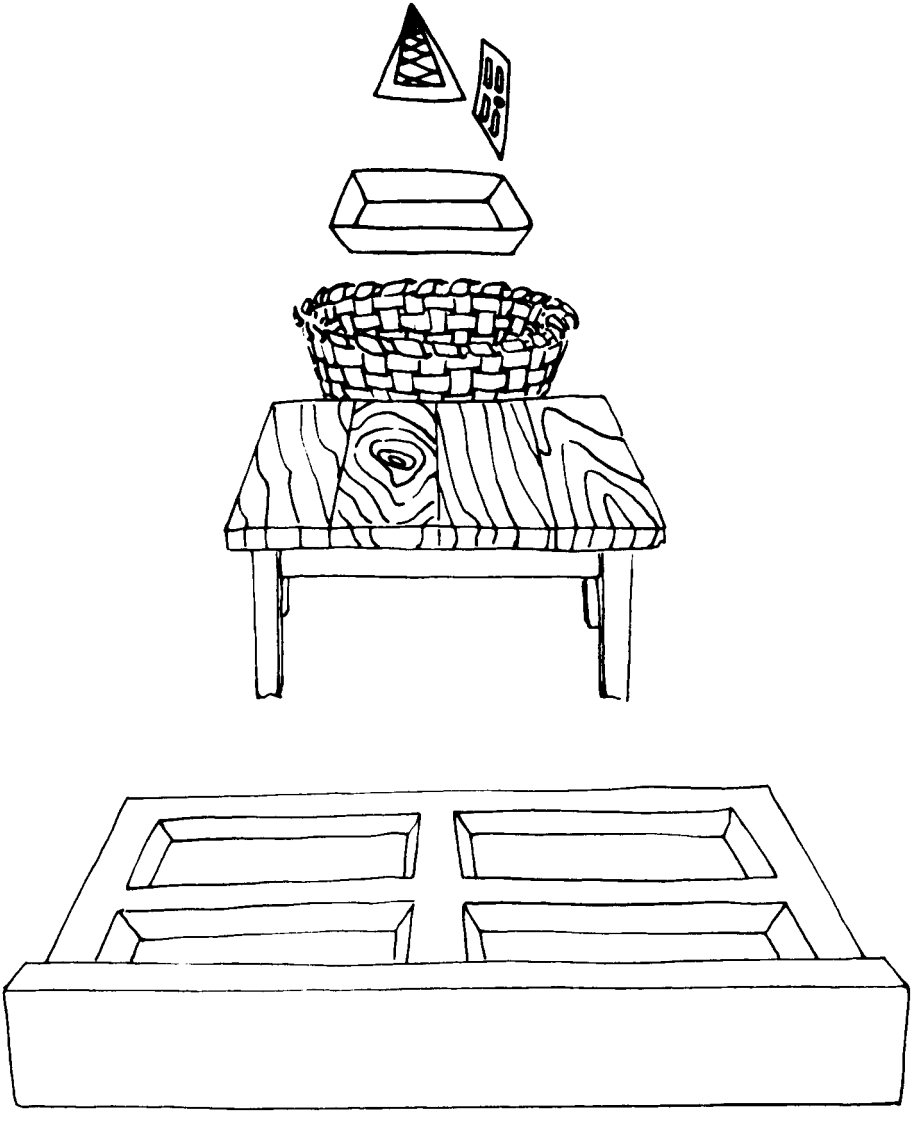

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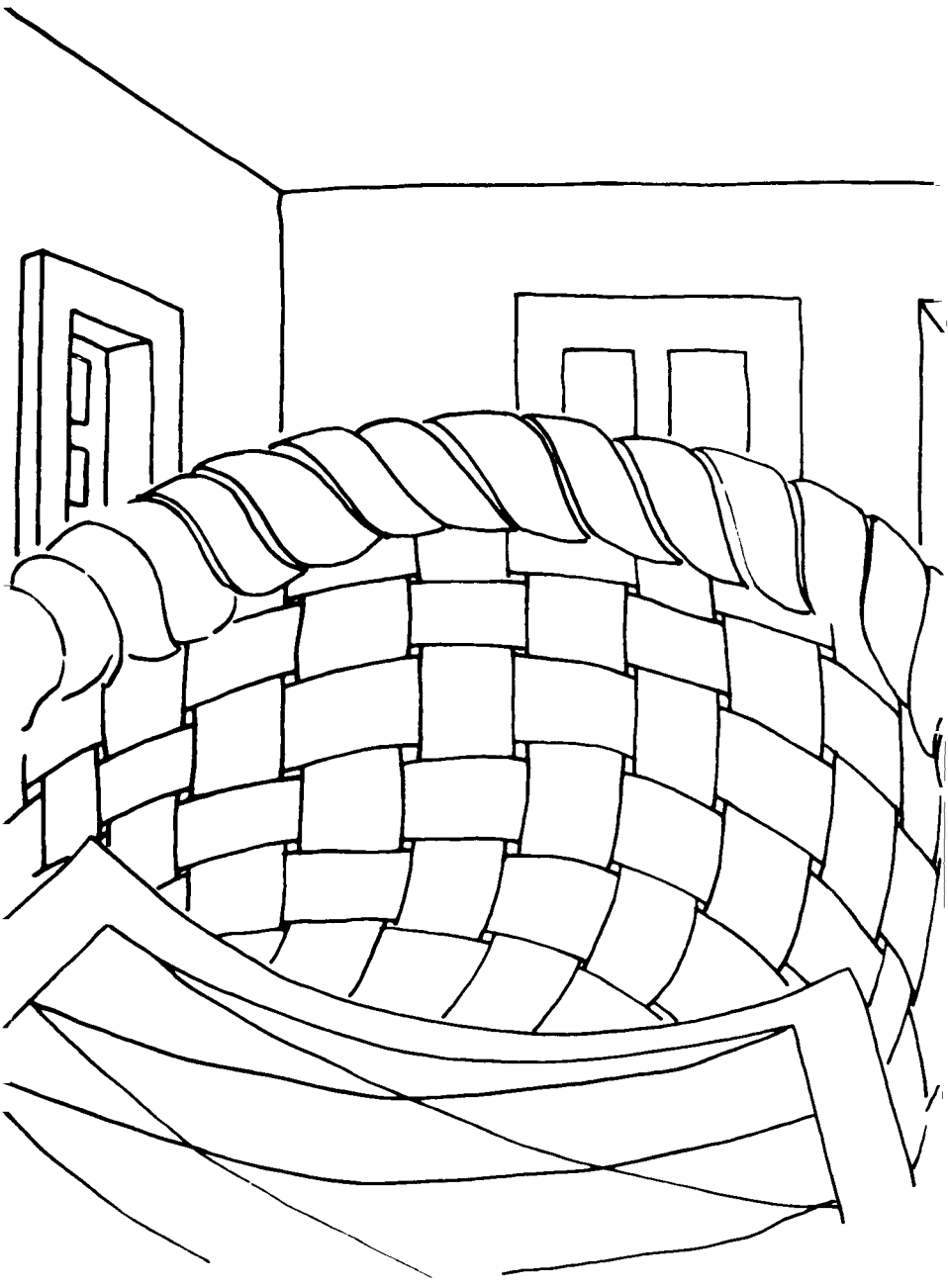

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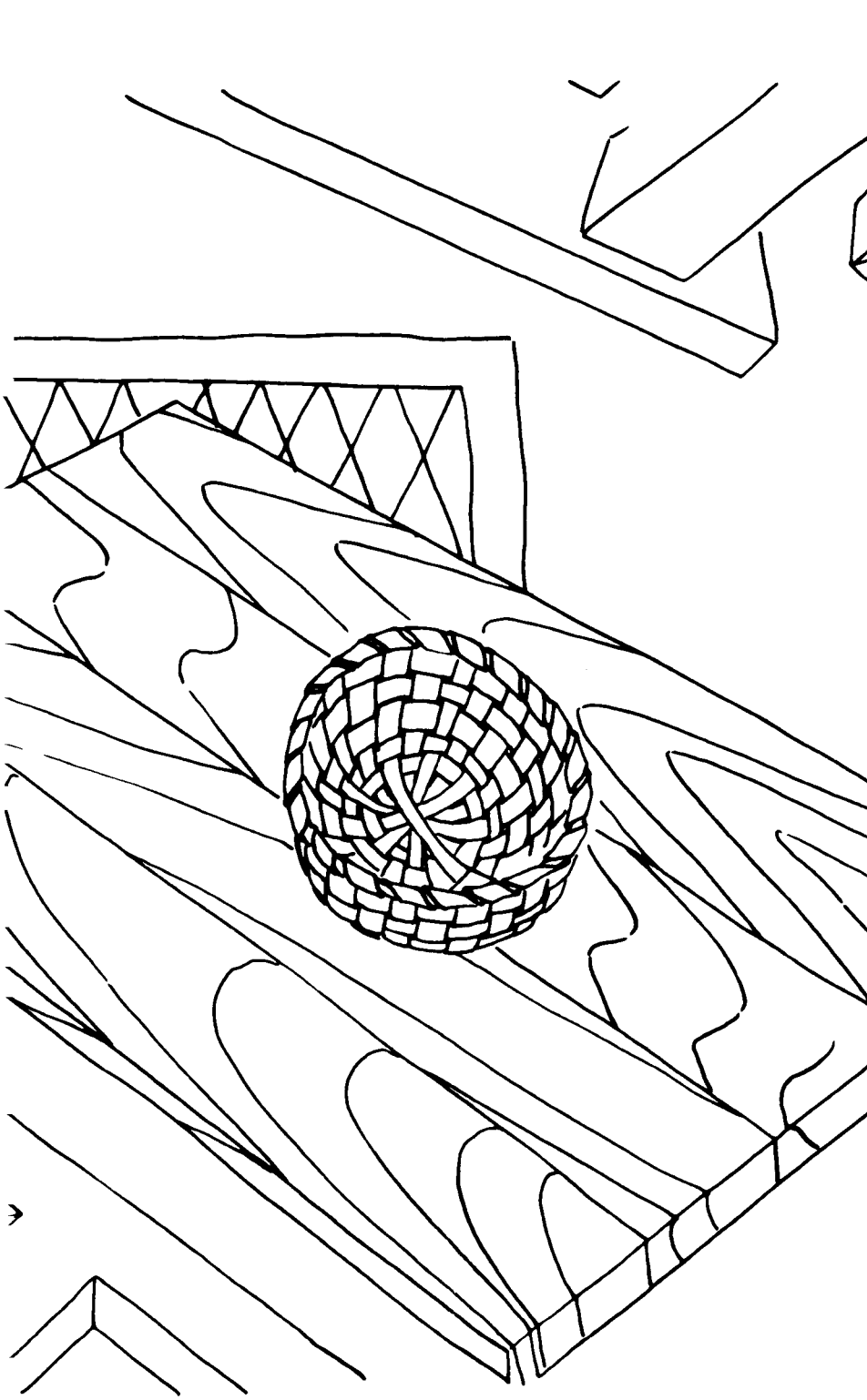

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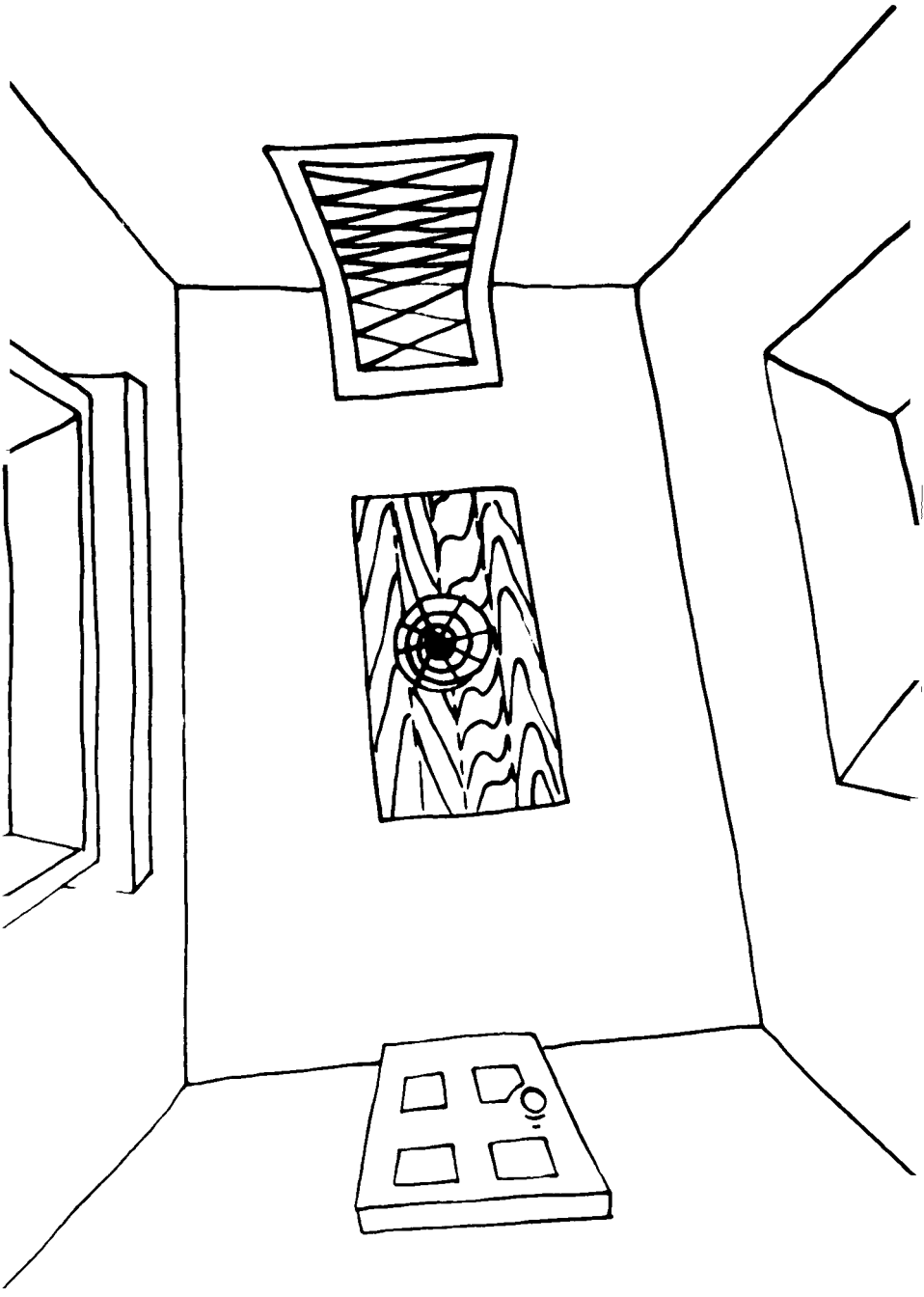

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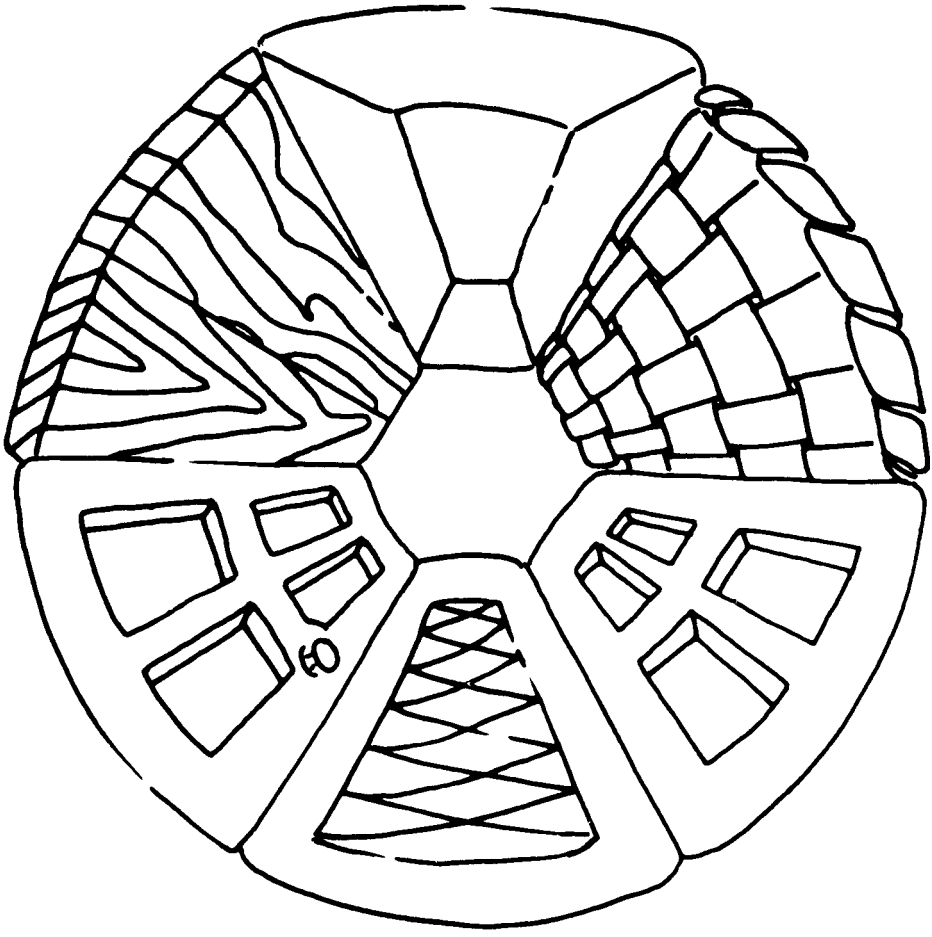

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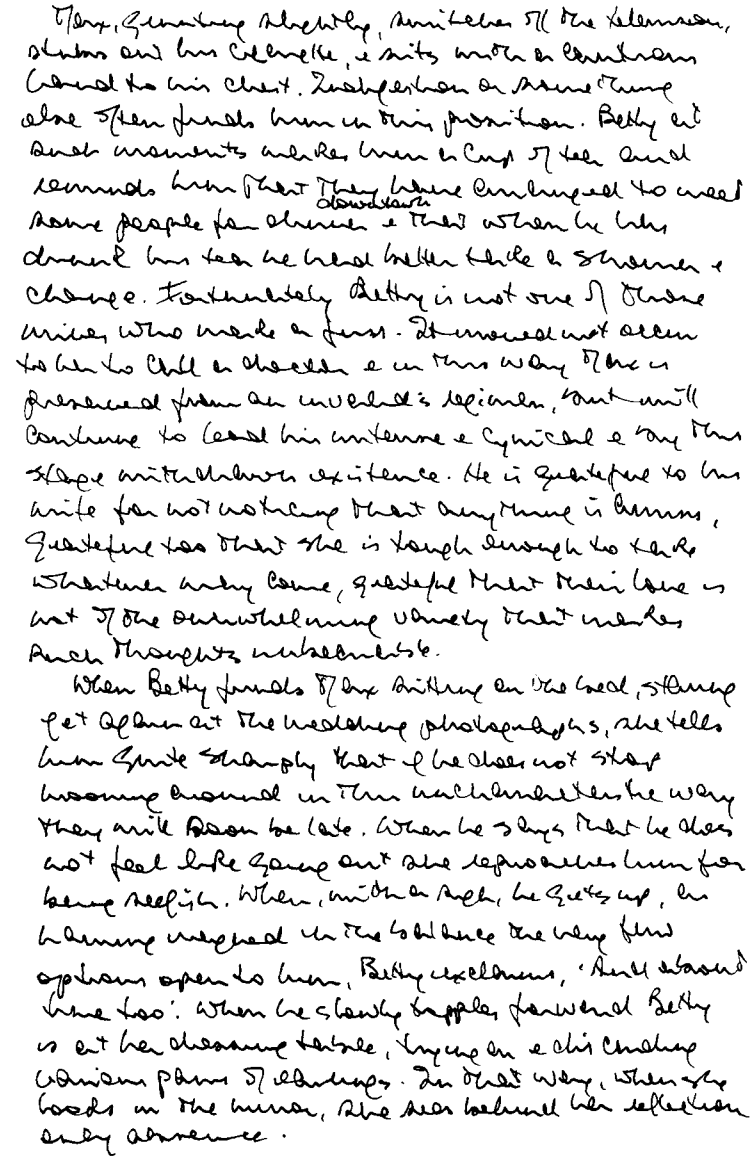

A manuscript page from Anita Brookner's novel Family and Friends.

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The Art of Fiction XCVIII
Anita Brookner

Anita Brookner was in her midforties before she started writing novels. Until then she had been famous as an art historian. Her studies of David, Greuze and Watteau, and her collection of essays on poets and writers as art critics, from Diderot to Baudelaire, The Genius of the Future, *had established her as an international authority on eighteenth and nineteenth century French art.*

In 1981 her first novel, A Start In Life, *entitled* The Debut *in its American edition, was published and at once was hailed by critics and public alike. Two subsequent novels,*

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Providence *and* Look At Me, *followed in quick succession. Their unusual mixture of feminine sensibility and intellectual vigor, elegant classical style and modern psychological complexity, consolidated her reputation as an original and accomplished novelist. In 1984 she won the Booker-McConnell Prize for her fourth novel,* Hotel du Lac, *and later the same year her* Family and Friends *became a best-seller on both sides of the Atlantic. Her latest novel,* The Misalliance, *was published in Britain last year and in the States recently. She has a new novel due out in October,* A Friend From England, *and is now working on another one, "taking it slowly."*

Anita Brookner was born in London to Polish-Jewish parents. Her father changed his name from Bruckner to Brookner ("Like calling yourself Batehoven!"). She studied French literature at The University of London and later art history at the Courtauld Institute of Fine Arts. After earning her doctorate she became a reader in the history of art at the Courtauld Institute, where she still teaches, although she plans to stop teaching soon to devote herself entirely to her fiction and critical writing. In 1967 she became Slade Professor at Cambridge, the first woman ever to hold the position.

Brookner works in an office at the Courtauld Institute filled with books and pictures of French paintings, a desk strewn with papers, and an old typewriter. She also works at home, in Chelsea. She lives in a small but sunny and quiet apartment, furnished in light colors, which overlooks a large, pleasant communal garden. When asked how it felt to work in the male-dominated atmosphere of Cambridge University in the sixties, she answered, "Nobody looked all that male and I didn't look all that female." In fact she does look very feminine: petite, slim, and casually but most elegantly dressed. Reddish well-cut hair frames her pale, striking face, which is dominated by large beautiful blue eyes. Her exquisite manners disarm and put visitors at ease, and at the same time secure a reasonable distance. She speaks in a deep, gentle voice, with fluency and deliberation in equal measure, and sometimes in "short, military sentences," as she once said of Stend-

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hal. Occasionally she smokes a very slim cigarette. This interview took place at her Chelsea home.

INTERVIEWER

Let us start at the beginning. Did anything in your background lead you to believe that one day you would become a scholar and a novelist?

ANITA BROOKNER

Oh no! Anything but! I was brought up to look after my parents. My family were Polish Jews and we lived with my grandmother, with uncles and aunts and cousins all around, and I thought everybody lived like that. They were transplanted and fragile people, an unhappy brood, and I felt that I had to protect them. Indeed that is what they expected. As a result I became an adult too soon and paradoxically never grew up. My mother had been a concert singer but had given up to marry. She was inclined to melancholy and when she sang at home my father used to get angry, with good reason—it was only in her singing that she showed passion. I would start to cry and be taken out of the room by the Nanny. She, not I, should have been the liberated woman. My father, who didn't really understand the English, loved Dickens; he thought Dickens gave a true picture of England, where right always triumphed. I still read a Dickens novel every year and I am still looking for a Nicholas Nickleby!

INTERVIEWER

Is that why all your heroines have a "displaced person" quality, and the family backgrounds are very Jewish, even though not explicitly? Were you brought up Jewish?

BROOKNER

Yes, very much so. I never learnt Hebrew because my health was fragile and it was thought that learning Hebrew would be an added burden. I regret it, because I would like to be able to join in fully. Not that I am a believer, but I would like to

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be. As for the "displaced person" aspect, perhaps it is because although I was born and raised here I have never been at home, completely. People say that I am always serious and depressing, but it seems to me that the English are *never* serious—they are flippant, complacent, ineffable, but never serious, which is sometimes maddening.

INTERVIEWER

The foreignness of your heroines is emphasized by the contrast between them and the very solidly English, Protestant men they are attracted to.

BROOKNER

I think the contrast is more between damaged people and those who are undamaged.

INTERVIEWER

Your first books were on artists and art history. What made you decide to try your hand at the novel?

BROOKNER

It was literally trying my hand, as you put it. I wondered how it was done and the only way to find out seemed to be to try and do it.

INTERVIEWER

You took the title, *A Start in Life,* from an obscure novel by Balzac, *Un Début dans la vie.* Was it autobiographical?

BROOKNER

It was. I wrote it in a moment of sadness and desperation. My life seemed to be drifting in predictable channels and I wanted to know how I deserved such a fate. I thought if I could write about it I would be able to impose some structure on my experience. It gave me a feeling of being at least in control. It was an exercise in self-analysis, and I tried to make it as objective as possible—no self-pity and no self-justification. But

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what is interesting about self-analysis is that it leads nowhere—it is an art form in itself.

INTERVIEWER

In your two subsequent novels you give different reasons for wanting to write. In *Look At Me* you say that writing is your penance for not being lucky.

BROOKNER

I meant that writing is a very lonely activity. You go for days without seeing or talking to anyone. And all the time out there people are living happy, fulfilled lives—or you think they are. If I were happy, married with six children, I wouldn't be writing. And I doubt if I should want to. But since I wrote that sentence I have changed. Now I write because I enjoy it. Writing has freed me from the despair of living. I feel well when I am writing; I even put on a little weight!

INTERVIEWER

You also said that you write to be hard, to remind people that you are there.

BROOKNER

I have changed my mind about that too. Far from making me hard, writing has made me softer, more understanding, more observant, and perhaps more passive in the sense that other people and their opinion of me seems to matter less.

INTERVIEWER

It seems that writers wish to find a reason for their activity: Paul Eluard called it *"le dur dêsir de durer."* And lately E. M. Cioran said, *"L'écriture est la revanche de l'homme contre une Creation baclée."* And you say, in *Providence*, that you write to tell the truth, what you call the Cassandra complex.

BROOKNER

I agree with Cioran, in so far as we all try to put some order

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into chaos. The truth I'm trying to convey is not a startling one, it is simply a peeling away of affectation. I use whatever gift I have to get behind the facade. But I hope I am not an aggressive writer, and that I see through people with compassion and humor. My own life was disappointing—I was *mal partie* (started on the wrong footing); so I am trying to edit the whole thing. It was the need for order in my own life that made me start. And once the floodgates are open, you must go all the way.

INTERVIEWER

Your first three novels seem to be variations on the same theme. The basic argument is that we are deceived by literature in believing that virtue is rewarded, that good will win in the end, and that Cinderella will always get the Prince. Whereas, in reality, honest, disciplined and principled people lose to the beautiful and the selfish.

BROOKNER

Not selfish—plausible. My new novel goes further: I now feel that all good fortune is a gift of the gods, and that you don't win the favor of the ancient gods by being good, but by being *bold*.

INTERVIEWER

Sometimes the beautiful and the bold lose to lesser people because they don't use the right stratagems. For example, Anna Karenina: Tolstoy very cleverly shows that all around her people are having love affairs which everyone knows about and condones because it is all a game and does not threaten the accepted order. Anna, too honest, wants to go all the way and rock the boat, divorce her husband and marry her lover; she creates a scandal and so she is condemned.

BROOKNER

Anna loses because, for all her boldness, she can't commit herself morally to her actions. She feels guilty about her son and misjudges her Vronsky. She can't accept that men can't

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keep up the same pitch of passion as women can—that they cool off. With men passion is all at the beginning and with women it is all along.

INTERVIEWER

In your fourth novel, *Hotel du Lac*, you expose the falsehood of another myth, "The Tortoise and the Hare," and you say that in real life the hare wins every time, never the slow, patient tortoise.

BROOKNER

Every time! Look around you. It is my contention that Aesop was writing for the tortoise market. Anyway, hares have no time to read—they are too busy winning the game!

INTERVIEWER

All your heroines follow "an inexorable progress toward further loneliness," as you say of Kitty Maule in *Providence*. It seems to me very deterministic. Is there nothing we can do to alter our fate?

BROOKNER

I think one's character and predisposition determine one's fate, I'm afraid. But *Providence* seems deterministic because it is a *novel*, and a novel follows its own organic structure.

INTERVIEWER

At the same time you say that existentialism is the only philosophy you can endorse. Now, existentialism, with its emphasis on personal freedom, seems the opposite of determinism.

BROOKNER

I don't believe that anyone is free. What I meant was that existentialism is about being a saint without God; being your own hero, without all the sanction and support of religion or society. Freedom in existentialist terms breeds anxiety, and you have to accept that anxiety as the price to pay. I think choice is a luxury most people can't afford. I mean when you make

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a break for freedom you don't necessarily find company on the way, you find loneliness. Life is a pilgrimage and if you don't play by the rules you don't find the Road to Damascus, you find the Crown of Thorn. In *Hotel du Lac* the heroine, Edith Hope, twice nearly marries. She balks at the last minute and decides to stay in a hopeless relationship with a married man. As I wrote it I felt very sorry for her and at the same time very angry: she should have married one of them—they were interchangeable anyway—and at least gain some worldly success, some social respectability. I have a good mind to let her do it in some other novel and see how she will cope!

INTERVIEWER

You also said that existentialism is a Romantic creed. How so?

BROOKNER

Because Romanticism doesn't make sense unless you realize that it grew out of the French Revolution in which human behavior sank to such terrible depths that it became obvious no supernatural power, if it existed, could possibly countenance it. For the first time Europeans felt that God was dead. Since then we have had Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, whose activities make the French Revolution seem like a picnic. The Romantics tried to compensate for the absence of God with furious creative activity. If you do not have the gift of faith which wraps everything up in a foolproof system and which is predicated on the belief that there is a loving Father who will do the best for you, then, as Sartre said, you have to live out of that system completely, and become your own father. This is a terrible decision, and, as I said, in existential terms freedom is not desirable, it is a woeful curse. You have to live with absence. Nowadays I wonder if it is really possible to live without God, maybe we should dare to hope. . . I don't know. I'm not there yet.

INTERVIEWER

Perhaps this is the reason some people convert to religion

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at the last minute. Even Voltaire called a priest just before he died!

BROOKNER

Ah, but Voltaire accepted the priest on *his* terms: when the priest asked him, "Monsieur de Voltaire, do you believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ?" he replied, "Don't talk to me about that *man*!" He rejected the divinity of Christ but accepted him as the Perfect Man. But not everyone is as brave as Voltaire.

INTERVIEWER

In your study of French art you started with the eighteenth century and switched to the nineteenth. It was the latter century that influenced you in your novels. What is the difference between the two, for you?

BROOKNER

I think the acquisition of greater experience and the loss of a certain innocence. The eighteenth century believed that Reason could change things for the better, and that all would have the vote in the Republic of Virtue. After the Revolution, people realized that Reason could not change anything, that man is moved not by Reason but by darker forces. Despotism, tyranny, even cannibalism—informing on one's neighbors—became quite routine. After 1793 it was no longer possible to close one's eyes to the base aspect of human nature—God really was dead. It opened the floodgates to self-examination. "Where does it all come from?" they asked. And it was discovered that once you no longer were constrained to be good, either by Christianity or by a secular philosophy which for a time was even stronger, namely the Enlightenment, there was no limit to bad behavior. But also to inventive, creative, autobiographical behavior.

INTERVIEWER

It produced alienation, or separation anxiety, as they call it.

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BROOKNER

Exactly. Because to find yourself in a world without beginning or end is a Romantic discovery.

INTERVIEWER

Did you read the German Romantics?

BROOKNER

Kleist, yes. He seems to be the really tragic figure. But I don't know them well.

INTERVIEWER

I asked the question because what you said tallies with what Isaiah Berlin says: that all the problems of our age can be traced back to Romanticism, especially the Germans who were the true Romantics and invented the whole thing, so to speak: nihilism, Marxism, existentialism, etc. . .

BROOKNER

He is absolutely right. It was hearing him lecture on the subject that impressed me so much and made me decide to take it up and teach it myself.

INTERVIEWER

What about Goethe? He started life as a Romantic and changed his heart: "Classicism is health, Romanticism is sickness," he said.

BROOKNER

He did turn his coat, didn't he? He precipitated the discovery of Romanticism-as-sickness with *Werther*, where he appears to condone a Romantic suicide. But *Elective Affinities* is a very difficult book. It has no moral center. It is about the mechanistic behavior of people in society and goes like clockwork. I find it an enigmatic, and rather a disgusting book.

INTERVIEWER

You once said that Zola was your favorite writer when you

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were young. Do you think your determinism is due to Zola's influence?

BROOKNER

No. Zola's determinism is too crude and mechanistic. He is talking about heredity in genetic terms; for example, if your father was an alcoholic you will become one too. I don't believe that. When I said that Zola was my favorite writer, I meant that I loved his courage, his indignation. Like Dickens he was an angry writer—angry at the unfairness of things, and the burden transmitted by ancestors for which we are not responsible and to which we have to succumb.

INTERVIEWER

Apart from Zola and Dickens, who were your early influences?

BROOKNER

When I was studying French at the university I read an enormous number of French novelists. I never thought that one day I would write a novel myself, because I thought that these people were telling me something very important which could not be duplicated. My influences were Balzac, Stendhal, and to a much lesser degree Flaubert. I think Flaubert colludes too much—he *wants* his characters to be defeated. Stendhal was the one I loved most. He was the true Romantic: "I walk in the street marvelling at the stars and I'm run over by a cab," he said. That sums it up! I also read English Victorian novels: Trollope for decent feelings, George Eliot for moral seriousness. And of course the great Russians.

INTERVIEWER

What about Proust?

BROOKNER

He is an exceptional case and very precious to me. He kept himself in a state of mind so hypnotic and dangerous that one approaches rereading him almost with fear. He remained al-

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ways marginal, observing. The cost was too high, when all is said and done. The periods of remaining in that childlike state of receptivity are terrifying. The awful thing is that he got it *right all the time.* It is all true!

INTERVIEWER

In *A Start in Life* there is a critique of Balzac's *Eugénie Grandet*, and in *Providence* one of Benjamin Constant's *Adolphe*. Did you mean that although literature can mislead one, it can also provide moral models?

BROOKNER

Yes, *Adolphe* is a deeply serious and moral novel: it asks what do you do when you are the author of a disaster? Ellénore in *Adolphe* and Kitty in *Providence* are victims of disasters because they misjudge their men.

INTERVIEWER

You seem to insist on great moral rectitude in your characters. Do you think all great novelists have been moralists, from Tolstoy to Camus?

BROOKNER

Indeed I do. And some lesser ones too. In my case it comes from a grounding in the nineteenth century novel and because my own family were very strict in that respect. I have never unlearnt the lesson. I would love to be more plausible, flattering, frivolous, but I am handicapped by my expectations. Isn't it sad?

INTERVIEWER

Hence your recent passion for Henry James and Edith Wharton, whom you said you would most wish to resemble.

BROOKNER

Henry James seems to me to have all the moral conscience

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that everybody should have. He writes basically about scruples, and his hesitations are so valid that they are the secular equivalent of religious obligations.

INTERVIEWER

Yet Henry James's duality—innocent American versus wily European—seems less relevant today, while Edith Wharton's overall complexity is more universal.

BROOKNER

That is true, and for that reason Wharton has worn better and reads more easily. Someone said that Edith Wharton's novels are what Henry James would have written if he had been a man! She is Henry James without the duality of innocence versus experience. But she does not have the lamb-to-the-slaughter quality which Henry James invests in his heroines and which is almost Greek. It is a very potent theme in fiction: innocence betrayed. Isabel Archer in *Portrait of a Lady* is completely innocent of other people's plans. But I don't believe that, past a certain age, anyone is innocent, except in fiction! But no one can get near Lily Bart of Wharton's *The House of Mirth,* because she is innocent yet has no conscience. She wants someone to pay her way through life but balks at the horrible men who are willing to do it for her. Of the two, Henry James is more of a giant, simply because Wharton didn't write as many great novels—perhaps four—while James's sheer bulk and Balzacian fecundity is overwhelming. I am now reading his short stories: there are hundreds of them and mostly wonderful.

INTERVIEWER

One original and interesting aspect of Edith Wharton is that in her great novels the moral option is nearly always taken by the women; just as the men are about to succumb to temptation and cause havoc, the women pull them back from the brink.

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BROOKNER

Yes, they are much braver and less divided than the men. I am afraid my heroines do the same, according to their own, contemporary, light.

INTERVIEWER

Do you read contemporary novelists?

BROOKNER

Constantly! And everything that comes out. At present I am rereading Philip Roth, and I *adore* him! I buy hardback books, which I am told is rather extravagant, but I feel I owe it to my fellow writers.

INTERVIEWER

What about women novelists?

BROOKNER

The women novelists I admire in the English tradition are Rosamond Lehmann, Elizabeth Taylor and Storm Jameson. Much less Ivy Compton-Burnett—she is brilliantly clever but too cruel. I admire Jean Rhys, especially *The Wide Sargasso Sea*, but she is too limited by her pathology. Outside the English tradition the Czech novelist Edith Templeton, who writes in impeccable English, is marvellously restrained. She tells strong stories about life in old-style Central Europe, with recognizable passions and follies. The Canadians Mavis Gallant and Edith de Born I very much enjoy too. These are all much more stoical and less sentimental than English writers.

INTERVIEWER

In *Hotel du Lac* Edith Hope is a writer of "romance" novels, of the Barbara Cartland, Mills & Boon type. She says, "I believe every word I write." What is the difference between that kind of romantic novel and the genuine article? Is it just the invariably happy ending? Or simply the quality of writing and the mind behind it?

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BROOKNER

Both. Romance novels are formula novels. I have read some and they seem to be writing about a different species. The true Romantic novel is about delayed happiness, and the pilgrimage you go through to get that imagined happiness. In the genuine Romantic novel there is confrontation with truth and in the "romance" novel a similar confrontation with a surrogate, plastic version of the truth. Romantic writers are characterized by absolute longing—perhaps for something that is not there and cannot be there. And they go along with all the hurt and embarrassment of identifying the real thing and wanting it. In that sense Edith Hope is not a twentieth century heroine, she belongs to the nineteenth century. What I can't understand is the radical inauthenticity of some women's novels which are written to a formula: from the peatbogs of Killarney to the penthouses of Manhattan, orgasms all the way! Pornography for ladies. It is not only impure artistically, it is untrue and unfeminine. To remain pure a novel has to cast a moral puzzle. Anything else is mere negotiation.

INTERVIEWER

In *Hotel du Lac* you say that you prefer the company of men to that of women. Which brings me to ask you about your relation to feminism.

BROOKNER

I prefer the company of men because they teach me things I don't know.

INTERVIEWER

One might say, to paraphrase Sartre, "*L'homme c'est l'autre*"?

BROOKNER

Exactly. It is the otherness that fascinates me. As for feminism, I think it is good for women to earn their living and thereby control their own destinies to some extent. They pay a heavy price for independence though. I marvel at the energy

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of women who combine husbands, children, and a profession. Anyone who thinks she will fulfill herself in that way can't be realistic. The self-fulfilled woman is far from reality—it is a sort of Shavian fantasy that you can be a complete woman. Besides, a complete woman is probably not a very admirable creature. She is manipulative, uses other people to get her own way, and works within whatever system she is in. The *ideal* woman, on the other hand, is quite different; she lives according to a set of principles and is somehow very rare and always has been. As for the radical feminism of today, the rejection of the male, I find it absurd. It leads to sterility. They say it is a reasoned alternative, but an alternative to what? To continuity?

INTERVIEWER

But if feminism has not succeeded in dispelling mistrust between men and women, or in making their relationship any easier, it seems to have enhanced friendship between women. Don't you think so?

BROOKNER

I believe that is true. There was a time when if a woman went to the theater with a girlfriend it was considered an admission of failure. Not so any more. Sometimes one prefers going with a friend, because it is less of a production. It is casual and relaxed, an evening's entertainment, not a prelude to something else.

INTERVIEWER

I would like to talk about your style, which has rightly been praised as exceptionally elegant, lucid and original. You explain it somewhat in *Providence* by saying, "A novel is not simply confession, it is about the author's choice of words". What does style mean to you?

BROOKNER

Very little. I am not conscious of having a style. I write quite

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easily, without thinking about the words much but rather about what they want to say. I do think that respect for form is absolutely necessary in any art form—painting, writing, anything. I try to write as lucidly as possible. You might say that lucidity is a conscious preoccupation. I am glad people seem to like it.

INTERVIEWER

Where do you write?

BROOKNER

Anywhere. In my flat, or in my office at the Courtauld. I have even written on a bus. When you live in a small flat you write on the edge of things—there is no great set-up. I type what I have written at the office. I prefer working there because I like the interruptions—telephone calls, visitors. I am completely schizophrenic, as I can carry on a conversation in my head while another, apparently sensible conversation, is taking place with someone who has just come into the room. At home the isolation weighs on me. It is a terrible strain.

INTERVIEWER

Do you keep regular hours?

BROOKNER

I only write in the summer holidays when the Institute is closed. Each novel has been written during a summer, over three or four months. Then I work every day all day and stop in the evening. I try to switch off completely and not think about it till the next day.

INTERVIEWER

What do you do when the day's work is finished?

BROOKNER

I go for very long walks and wind down. I am grateful for the life in the streets—the people, the shopwindows. . .

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INTERVIEWER

With success must have come a certain amount of lionization: invitations to parties, literary gatherings, lectures. Are you good at saying no?

BROOKNER

Very good! Much too good! I ration myself strictly with regard to social life. I try not to give offense and I am never brutal, but I do say no.

INTERVIEWER

Don't you feel lonely sometimes?

BROOKNER

Often. I have said that I am one of the loneliest women in London. People have resented it—it is not done to confess to loneliness, but there it is.

INTERVIEWER

Do you ever rewrite what you have written?

BROOKNER

Never. It is always the first draft. I may alter the last chapter; I may lengthen it. Only because I get very tired at the end of a book and tend to rush and go too quickly, so when I have finished it I go over the last chapter.

INTERVIEWER

Do you know exactly how a novel will develop and end when you start, or do you let its organic growth take over?

BROOKNER

The latter. I have an idea, but I don't know exactly what will happen. As I said, in *Hotel du Lac* I wanted to let Edith Hope marry Mr. Neville, but like her I balked at the last minute! I am not really an imaginative writer.

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INTERVIEWER

What do you mean by that? And who do you think is an imaginative writer?

BROOKNER

I mean that I am not very inventive. Some contemporary American novelists are imaginative. Peter Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor* is a marvelously imaginative novel. So is Yann Quéffelec's *Noces Barbares*, because it cannot be verified. Whereas I like to examine the behavior of characters, the possibilities: why this way and not that way?

INTERVIEWER

So far all your novels have been the same length, around two hundred pages, with the same group of characters and more or less the same circumstances producing the same results. (Although *Family and Friends* has a bigger cast of characters.) Are you not afraid of being accused of writing to a formula, even though of your own creation?

BROOKNER

I have been so accused! But the latest book, *The Misalliance*, is much longer and has a broader canvas. It is quite different from the others, not at all deterministic, and rather sentimental. It has had excellent notices in the States but here the reviews were mixed, ranging from good to hostile, even abusive.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think English critics thought it was not "fair" that you should go around collecting dithyrambs for every novel?

BROOKNER

No, I think they had made the initial mistake of identifying me with my female protagonists, so that the criticism that comes my way, particularly in *The Misalliance*, is a semiper-

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sonal kind which does not rank as real criticism: I can't learn from it, I can only feel hurt by it. Also it wasn't a very good book, but it wasn't *that* bad either. I have written it off. I didn't like it even as I was writing it.

INTERVIEWER

Was it because the heroine, Blanche Vernon, is somewhat irritating, even boring?

BROOKNER

Well, she was a very aseptic character. The book has quite an interesting theme, which is that even good behavior can go wrong, if it is based on a fallacy or a misconception, that you can't take anything for granted, and that you are walking on egg shells every time you make a choice.

INTERVIEWER

But what emerged was that here was yet another "good woman", who behaves honorably but gets abandoned for someone more frivolous and jolly.

BROOKNER

There is a personal dislike directed against Blanche Vernon, because you can't blame her for anything, except perhaps for being a prig. Now that is a very minor vice in my book. The point is that there are a lot of women like her: nice, innocent, but boring. Nobody likes them and as a result they lead very miserable lives. They are not fun to be with and in England you've got to be *fun*; you must be a *fun* person, having fun all the time! It is very superficial, but there it is. The bad reviews were partly a dislike of Blanche, and of me since I'm supposed to be all these women I create. In America they liked it because they thought it was Jamesian, which I would not have dared to presume. Yet it *is* about a moral problem; so is the next one, which is coming out in the autumn and is called *A Friend from England*. It is a very old-fashioned moral tale.

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INTERVIEWER

Can you tell me a bit about it—without giving it away?

BROOKNER

It is about an extremely emancipated young woman—whom they will *not* be able to think is me!—who is drawn into a family of blameless innocence whom she feels called upon to protect, but by whose innocence she finds herself finally vanquished. She can't measure up to it. It is quite complicated, not only because it has a larger cast but because it is about men.

INTERVIEWER

Is it difficult because a woman can't get into the skin of a man, to understand what makes him tick?

BROOKNER

I am finding it surprisingly easy!

INTERVIEWER

It is often said that the greatest female heroines have been created by male novelists—Anna Karenina, Madame Bovary, *et al.*—but that the reverse has not yet happened. The only exceptions might be a couple of George Eliot's heroes.

BROOKNER

I was thinking of George Eliot, too. I think it can be done, but only at the end of a very long process. When you start to write a novel you have to learn to internalize your characters, not to describe them from the outside—that doesn't work. And this process of internalizing goes on through life. In the case of a male protagonist gradually you begin to internalize him too—if you are lucky—and this is more difficult for a woman and takes longer. Somehow it is more difficult for a woman to get inside a man than for a man to get inside a woman. Men are better at this, let us face it. I think women

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have an inborn fear of men, which of course they could never confess to. Instinctively they will cower from a man if he shows some kind of energy or violence. So to reconcile your instinct as a woman with a man's instinct takes a long time. A long time. But I'm trying!

INTERVIEWER

You review books for *The Spectator* and before writing novels you wrote excellent art history books. Your book on David is considered a model of the genre, combining as it does biography, history and criticism. Do you see a radical difference between the two genres—criticism versus creative writing? I ask this because some distinguished critics have found it difficult, if not impossible, to write fiction. I am thinking of Edmund Wilson and George Steiner, to mention but two who have tried.

BROOKNER

Wilson's novel is a very good and disturbing book. But I know what they mean: perhaps because in fiction you give too much away while in criticism you can hide behind another writer's personality and work. For me both are ways of working through a problem. I liken the whole process to writing an examination paper—you have a certain amount of time and space and you have to do your best. It is nerve-racking but not particularly difficult.

INTERVIEWER

What about teaching? Are you leaving the Courtauld Institute because you can now make a living as a writer?

BROOKNER

Not really, because I have loved teaching, and I've loved my students. Indeed I'm having the happiest year of my teaching life—perhaps because it is the last! It is just that I have taught for twenty-five years and the thought of having to go through the syllabus for the twenty-sixth year was more than I could take.

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INTERVIEWER

Will you ever write on art history again?

BROOKNER

No. That particular career is over. Once you have let it go you can't go back. I shall not give up studying, but I might do it with words rather than pictures, although pictures will come into it. At present I am working on a new novel and doing it more slowly than before.

INTERVIEWER

Despite their subtlety and variations, all your books so far have been basically about love. Do you think you will go on writing about love?

BROOKNER

What else is there? All the rest is mere literature!

—**Shusha Guppy**

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Banana Boats

Mary Ann Taylor-Hall

The old days, the Chicago days, rooms full of the smell of chicken paprikash, coffee, roasting pork, simmering prunes and apricots. Dark rooms full of dark furniture, of horsehair, claw feet, doilies, crucifixes with palm fronds stuck behind them. Of trunks and chests that women opened—Ma Kish, Aunt Jewel, Mrs. Starcheski from next door—and took things out of, their heads laid to one side: lace dickies wrapped in tissue, tea towels, starched and ironed, with crocheted edging, tiny vases of pink crystal, stroked, offered. *Here. For your hope chest.*

Dark crowded rooms, three slept in one bed. Everyone so poor, and yet there was always something to give, always something on the stove. Enough to feed anyone who came, even if it was just soup made with tomatoes and onions and dandelion greens from the park, or tripe, sliced very thin, fried with eggs. Always money for a handful of cigarettes, always music, Dvořák, Irving Berlin, Sigmund Romberg—*Come, come, I love you only, come, hero mine.* Carl the tenor, Joey the baritone, Frank the bass. Rosa could sing, in those days. She was the alto, she knew the harmonies. They all knew

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them. The old gang. Now her voice was a four-noted reed—thin from not much use, and also age. She tried it testingly, had to clear her throat and start again. *Lay your head upon my pillow.* She liked the sad songs with the beautiful melodies, the songs about knowing it was over. Marty Robbins, her favorite, dead now, she couldn't believe it.

Rosa watched her hands coming up out of the soapsuds. Her mother's hands came to her: down in the washtub, fishing through the water for the next shirt to scrub on the board. Thick palms, broad nails—strong hands, made for work, like her own, stretching to get around all the strings of the mop. Smelling of onions or bleach, when she lifted Rosa's face to give her a kiss. Rosa would lay her head in her mother's lap, and the big fingers would comb through her hair, checking for nits.

Father Novatny, tall, with long eyes like a saint's, grey-blue—he wanted to leave the Church to marry Rosa's mother! But she wouldn't let him. It was supposed to be a secret, but Genevieve knew somehow, because she was the oldest, and she told Agnes and Emma, and Agnes told Rosa, too young to hear things like that, Emma said—Agnes got a slap for telling. When the news came out that Father Novatny had asked to be transferred to another diocese, Rosa and Agnes ran and sat down on the steps of the church, hugging each other and crying, waiting for him to come with tears in his eyes to say goodbye to them. "Such beautiful girls," they thought he'd say. "Goodbye, take care of her for me." They kept themselves in tears for an hour, out there in the cold, but Father Novatny never showed up.

Rosa rinsed each dish and put it in the rack. Two plates, two forks, a pot. Two mugs, cheap white glass from the dime store, but they held the heat. Things got simpler and simpler, a bowl of cornflakes for breakfast, a little sandwich for lunch, then *Days of Our Lives.*

Only today, they didn't watch.

Buried alive, Gilbert had said, at the end of lunch, standing by the chair, rattling his keys in his pocket as if he wasn't sure what he would do next. The next time she saw him he was headed out the door in his Bermuda shorts and no shirt.

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"Where are you going, in this heat?" "To *work*, Rosa."

He used to call her his ball and chain, just kidding, a long time ago.

When she was twelve, thirteen, she would go with her mother sometimes to measure the rich Bohemian women out in Cicero for corsets. She would watch her mother working over their stout figures with her thin, flashing tape measure, gossiping with them in the old language, laughing with them in her dark way that made Rosa think she was saying something that wasn't too nice, holding the heel of her hand under her breast. She would call out the measurements for Rosa to write down in the book. Then they would all have coffee and kolache in the parlor.

Rosa's brothers and sisters in Chicago, the few still alive, could carry on a conversation in Bohemian yet, swearing and insulting each other's big behinds. She forgot, no one to talk it with here, what little she ever knew. It seemed that what stayed were the dirty words and the words to a few songs. *Ty to musíš platiti.* The one about the bad boy Pepichek stamping on the cabbages of Anninka and she says, "You, you must pay for this!" A merry tune, like a polka, for such words.

She went into the bedroom, creased the down pillows once, lengthwise, with a slap of her forearm, so that they would sit in a perfect roll along the headboard. *Lay your head upon my pillow. Hold your warm and tender body close to mine.* She smoothed the counterpane toward the head of the bed, banging all the wrinkles up under the pillows.

Her brain felt like that. Smooth.

Gil was still out there, edging and edging, to teach her a lesson, his bare chest dripping with sweat. An old man now. He looked like a baby boy, just learning to walk, teetering along, chin down, dragging the edger, his little behind poked out.

Ninety-eight degrees out there. Let him.

Sometimes she felt she lived in a deep, smooth-sided place now. Something like a well. Way up above her, people yak yak yakking. Gil telling his stories, trying to get attention. Not

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from her. She didn't listen anymore. She'd heard enough stories from him already.

She turned and looked out the window again. *I see London I see France.* Gil, lying on his back now in the grass, his thin legs sticking out the wide holes in his Bermuda shorts—she could see all the way to his white BVDs, a little shine up there in the dark. He made a V with the edger, which lay the other way, across the driveway. It came to her then that he might be dead, a new idea. It sent her flying back down the hall and out the front door. She was kneeling beside him, her hand on his wet, closed face.

It looked closed forever. She heard a thin sound—a little high hum she was making up in her head. She saw her life, her life alone, a thin white sheet on the line, blowing and bellying out and snapping in the wind.

But when she saw his eyelids flutter, heard his little fake moan, the sheet stopped flapping, hung still. She thought, coldly, "Oh, this one knows how to flutter his eyelids, he knows how to moan." Pretending to be dying, she'd given him the idea by telling him to kill himself. Ninety-eight degrees and he's out edging the driveway, not even wearing his baseball cap. "It *needs doing*, Rosa." Giving a lecture. The little foot in the white sneaker stepping down on the edger, to show it always did everything right. "Stay out here then, kill yourself, if it makes you happy."

It made him happy. Pretending to be at death's door. He loved death's door. He knew how to get there, and get back.

What if she just turned around and left him there to give his brain a sunbath until he felt like coming in? *Just turned around and left him there.* She saw herself for a second backing the car down the driveway, right over the edger. At first she couldn't see why not. But then the idea made a flutter in her chest, like a bird with sharp wings trapped behind her ribs. Where would she go? She was staying. Let *him* go, if that's what he wanted.

Anyway, he didn't look too good, maybe he really did pass out, a little heat stroke maybe.

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She stooped behind him and got him lifted into a sitting position, laid his arm around her shoulder and pulled him to his feet, her arms slipping up his wet back. She wasn't calling anyone for help—a big occasion, an audience, just what he wanted. She dragged him across the grass, the heat around her legs like thick water. One foot, then the other, up the three concrete steps and the last hard one, over the lintel into the air conditioning. He sagged against her across the rug, moaning. *Putting on, always putting on*, she thought, and then, *Bastard*. Heart attacks, fainting spells. All her life she was waiting for the next time his eyes rolled back in his head. The trouble was, back at the beginning, it was nothing to joke about, a lot of doctors from Johns Hopkins agreed. You never knew when he was going to keel over. But his heart had healed itself a long time ago, the way they said it would, if he lived long enough, only by then, he was used to the excitement. He couldn't break the habit. She got him to the couch, lowered him, put pillows under his feet. The whole side of her was wet with his sweat. He opened his blue eyes, pretending he didn't know where he was. They had a sliding icy look.

"You passed out from the heat," she told him. He closed his eyes again, to show he wasn't pleased with what she said. What she was supposed to say was, "Oh Gilbert, you were right, this yard's too much for us now."

She hurried to the kitchen for a basin of water, brought it back, knelt and sponged him off. Let him hire somebody to take care of the yard. He had plenty of money. Enough to buy a condominium was enough to hire somebody to take care of the yard. He lay there like a corpse in his folded brown skin. Maybe he really did faint, he could have gone that far. Maybe he'd just as soon die as stay here, buried alive. She got him a glass of water, raised his head. "Cold," he said, in a cranky voice. She wiped the water that had trickled down onto his chest, ran into the bedroom to get a quilt, came back and covered him, then straightened herself and looked at him, his brown hand laid out on his chest in a dainty way—wrist up, fingers spread. When she'd gone out before to try to make him come in he'd said, "You want to stay in this house but you have

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no *idea* what's involved." No *ah*dyuh, that was how he pronounced it, his Southern accent, mouth full of mush. "Out in that heat," she told him now. "Anyone would pass out." He closed his eyes. Pretty soon he was snoring.

The clock went off on the marble-topped chest. It had the same tune as Big Ben. She didn't know how to make it stop chiming. She pulled out the chest and unplugged it, so it wouldn't disturb Gilbert. Let it be 2:25 forever, it was okay with her. But she felt guilty, the kids had given it to them for their Golden, a couple of months back. It was made the same year she and Gilbert got married, Tom told her—one of the first electrics. Don't remind me, kiddo, she said. I'm one of the first electrics myself. When it stopped buzzing and clicking around, the silence came down in the house. The hum of the refrigerator was the only thing. Except the mocker in the oak tree, and Gilbert snoring quietly.

She'd been trying all day to remember the name of the President of the United States.

Hey Joe!
Dere dey go!
Fifty—*Fifty what? Buses?*
Fifty *something* in a row,
No, Mo,
Dem is trucks—
Some wit cows and some wit ducks!

Wagons? Her brother Frank had taught her that, rest in peace. They would laugh till they cried. Fifty buses, was it? She couldn't remember.

Slipping. She was slipping.

She went down the alphabet, hoping a letter would jog her memory of the President's name. A, B, C. C was Carter, she remembered Jimmy Carter and his nice wife strolling down the street, hand in hand.

"Your mother's first response to everything is *no*," he told the kids. Ball and chain. It hadn't always been *no*. Back at the beginning for a long time it was yes, yes, yes, dumb her, like

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a song. From the heart. Lunchtime, sitting there eating his cookie, sharp little chews, jaw popping. Then, "I'm buying. You can come if you want to. I'm not going to let you bury me alive, Rosa."

She put a chicken in the pot, for soup. That would be good for him, with carrots and parsley and noodles. She started a load of laundry, looking out across the backyard. They'd planted those live oaks, the tallest in the neighborhood now, when they moved in. Stephen was a baby here, out in the yard in his little green bathing suit, pulling up zinnias, putting them in milk bottles. A sweet baby—tears would come to his eyes if you sang him a sad song. *On a mountain stands a lady, who she is I do not know.* That was one of them. *All she wants is gold and silver, all she wants is a fine young man.*

All these years—half her life. She could take care of the yard herself, rake the leaves, weed the beds. She liked to do it. In the evenings, when it was cool.

She went into the bathroom and got her savings book out from under the stack of single sheets. Over $20,000 in there now, from the rent money on the garage apartment. Just in case. She'd started putting it away that time when he cheated on her. She had her social security, too. She didn't think he could sell the house without her consent—*her* name was on the deed, too, she knew that much.

All it was was boredom, not even boredom, just wanting something new to talk about, some new way to get attention, something important to do—sort through things, make lists, follow her around saying, Rosa, we *must* do this and Rosa, we *must* do that.

She wanted nothing, to be quiet, smooth. No wrinkles for words to hide in, *bastard, dirty two-timer,* she didn't want those words anymore. Or the other ones that always came rushing in afterwards, guilty conscience—*loving father, good times, the bad with the good, you've made your bed.* She was sick of her own words, they tired her out. *Such are the vicissitudes.* "Such are the vicissitudes of life." She said that one out loud. That was what Tom used to say in high school, to be

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funny. She liked to say it, liked the sound of the words, the way they brought trouble down to size, made fun of it.

She remembered only the old days, not the name of the President. What would happen to her if Gilbert left? She didn't think he would do it. *He won't*, she told herself. *He can't.* She wasn't sure whether he could or not. "Go then," she'd told him. He gave her a fast look, and then started nodding, in a sarcastic way. "As usual, you don't have the *faintest* notion what you're talking about. I couldn't buy a condominium without selling this place."

This place, he said, as if he hated it.

She was pretty sure her name was on the deed.

He didn't wake up. She kept tiptoeing in to check on him, hoping he would stir, but he slept on, on his back, as the room got darker, his mouth fallen open. Finally, Rosa changed into her nightgown, ate some soup and watched a program on whales. How they sang to each other from afar. The lonely songs seemed to come from their bellies, from their big hearts.

When the program was over, she went in and laid her hand against Gil's forehead. It was only a little warm. He breathed in and out peacefully. She covered him to the chin, turned out all the lights.

She crawled up onto the high mattress and looked at her short bowed legs, brown against the sheet where her waltz-length nightgown ended. "Ride 'em, cowboy!" That's what the boys in Chicago yelled at her, that summer after third grade, when she finally got nits and had to have her head shaved. A wool stocking cap, all summer. The bad boys would chase her, trying to pull it off. She learned to run fast. "Ride 'em, cowboy," they yelled after her. Once Teddy Starcheski caught her. He said he wouldn't pull her cap off if she would give him a kiss. She made off she would, but when he leaned toward her, she kicked him hard in the shin and ran like crazy up the sidewalk to her house, shrieking all the way.

When Gilbert was better, when he was in a good mood, he would make up a story about what happened this afternoon, for the neighbors, or his poker club. He would tell it in his

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little flirty voice, how she came out and threw him over her shoulder and dumped him on the sofa. She tried to think it was funny, what had happened. *Such are the vicissitudes*. She thought how she would listen to him telling his story, how she would roll her eyes up at the ceiling and say, so everyone would think she was kidding, "I should have left him right where he fell. He had it coming."

"You'll keep me buried alive until I die," he had said this morning. Coming to her with his brochures and booklets. Pool and patio. Bridge club, Spanish lessons. "And what would *I* do?" she asked. "Stay in my five rooms and rot?" She wasn't the right one for him. Maybe once she was, but no more, not for a long time, face it. He needed somebody more like himself. Yes, and don't worry, he'd *gotten* somebody more like himself, too. Two-timer—she'd found out, never mind how, but that was over now, and now it was something else, sell the house they'd lived in thirty-five years, all paid for, and move to a condominium so he could play bridge all day with the rich Presbyterian widows—here they come with their one-dish casseroles and their nice cotton dresses.

He'll kill me yet, that man, she said to herself.

But Dr. Jordan wanted to know, later, on the telephone, if she was trying to kill *him*. When she called him, after she woke up in the middle of the night and found Gilbert on the bathroom floor. "Are you trying to kill him, Rosa?" Dr. Jordan asked. "Why didn't you call me the first time he passed out?"

She heard her voice, like a runaway horse with the cart still hitched on, explaining and explaining.

"From now on, when he faints, call me," Dr. Jordan interrupted her crossly. "He's eighty-two years old, you know."

He sent an ambulance. Two men carried Gilbert out of the house on a stretcher. Something about this rang a bell, as though on a stretcher was where Gilbert was always supposed to be. They didn't have the light flashing, too bad—if Gilbert had his way, there'd be a siren and a crowd of neighbors standing around in their bathrobes, with worried expressions on their faces, telling each other, "It's Gil Cannon. Something's happened to Gil."

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She followed behind the ambulance in her car, around the lake, fast, praying not to hit something.

By the time she got to his room, they had him hooked up to a machine. He was a small man, a little Ike—that's who everyone always used to say he looked like. He let out some weak, gurgling moans. "Out in the hot sun all afternoon, edging the driveway," she explained to Dr. Jordan and the nurses. "Sweat pouring off of him. It didn't even need it." The nurses looked at her, then away. Maybe she had already said that, maybe she was talking too loud. Or maybe *they* were mad at her, too. "I think he had a little heat stroke." She stood at the foot of the bed, not knowing what to do, while the nurses bustled around. Then, out of the blue, the banana boat came into her mind. *Tampa to Rio.* She hadn't thought about it in years. A hiccup of laughter rose in her chest. She bit her cheeks, looked down at Gilbert, in that white hospital gown, his dry lip caught on his eye tooth, his eyes rolled back, just slits of white showing under the lids. That only made it worse. A little corpse. She had to turn away, had to squeeze her eyes shut and pretend to be choking, because Dr. Jordan and the nurses already thought she was crazy.

"I want you to go on home, Rosa," Dr. Jordan said. He put his hand on her shoulder. "We'll run some tests tomorrow to be sure, but I don't think there's anything much wrong with him, besides being dehydrated." *So give him a drink of water,* she thought, but she said, "I want to stay for a while." To make up for everything.

"Suit yourself," he said, smiling his thin smile, patting her shoulder, trying to be nice.

She sat in the chair in the dark corner, out of everybody's way. Just nerves. She wiped her eyes now, in private. She remembered how she and her friend Josephine used to bite their cheeks to keep from laughing in church. How they would kneel, their red faces hidden in their hands, how they would weep and sometimes wet their pants, their shoulders helplessly shaking as the priest waved the censer.

She and Josie, strolling down the street arm in arm, harmonizing. *We'll build a sweet little nest/Somewhere out in the*

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West. What was west of Chicago? Don't ask *them*. All they knew was which boys liked them. Counting them off on their fingers, like beads on the rosary. Putting flowers behind their ears and waltzing together. Josie's mother had beautiful black hair down to her knees when she took the pins out to brush it. No grey at all, until she was sixty. Ma Kish. She made them dobosh torte, ten thin layers, with whipped cream filling in between. "Eat, or you'll never fill out."

Dancing the Varsouviana down through the dark rooms of the Kishs' railroad flat, Ma Kish rolling out the wild chords on the old upright.

On laundry day, she and Josie would dress up in the dusty organdy curtains, and pretend they were princesses, or brides. The smell of soap and steam in the little flat, and they would be back in Ma Kish's dark bedroom, arranging the ruffled edging of the peach-colored curtains around their heads and shoulders, helping themselves to the rouge, looking at themselves in the big mirror with the gilt frame around it, hardly believing their eyes.

One of the nurses—the one with the suntan and green eyes—came in again and gave Gilbert a shot, then quickly arranged him again with the covers over him. His eyelids fluttered and he said something Rosa couldn't make out; then he was asleep again. The nurse looked at him, head to one side. "What a little doll," she said. She looked at Rosa as if to tell her she ought to appreciate him more, take better care of him.

She wished she could shake him awake, make him sit up and tell the nurse how he came down with the yellow fever after the banana boat got to Brazil, since she was so interested. Tell her how the natives carried him out of the jungle in a hammock on poles, and he screamed and screamed, out of his head. Rosa remembered his clear, serious blue eyes when he told her to explain why he put his hand over his chest like that sometimes, how near to death he had come that time, and so young. Holding her hand: *the fever scarred my heart, Rosa.* She wondered what this pretty young nurse would do with someone who held her hand and told her that, with such a sad look. What *Rosa* had done, of course, was marry him.

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She was twenty-four by then, not so bad these days, but old, an old maid already, in those times, bringing presents to Josie's two little boys, Chuckie and Dennis. Rosa went into an empty church one evening after work and prayed God to send her someone to take care of. Two weeks later, God sent Gilbert, with his scarred heart and thin overcoat. Sent him to the Aragon Ballroom, sent him across the polished floor to ask her to dance, Wayne King playing *Always*, the sweet clarinet sliding its narrow notes into the smoky air. She had on her new crimson dress, long-waisted. "Your name should be Rose, in that dress," he said, his voice not like any voice from around Chicago. "It's Rosa," she told him, feeling shy, because of the nice way he put his hand on her waist. He told her she was a wonderful dancer. She knew she was a wonderful dancer, but she was twenty-four, a supervisor at the telephone company, making good money, even in the Depression, because she had worked there by then for ten years. She lied about her age to get that job, the only lie she ever told.

He held her just the way a new man should, respectful of her, lightly sliding his hand—smooth and dry, not sweaty, like some—over hers; she felt, in his arms, that she could leave all the steps to him. She hardly knew she was dancing. Something was going to happen, something was happening. She relaxed, her brow finally resting against the sweet clean side of his neck. Her dreams would come true, she should relax.

A Southerner, so courteous, new in town. "Where are you from?" "From far away." *A true gentleman*, her sister Emma said. It was a cold, snowy winter. He'd found a job as a shoe salesman and he was grateful to have it, he told her. He'd lost everything in the Florida Bust. *Lost everything*. When he said that, she saw orange groves and automobiles and big white houses falling sadly through the sky. "May I see you home?" he asked, but she went home on the street-car, with her girlfriends from the telephone company, Vi and Veronica. "May ah see you-all home?" they teased her, in their rough, jokey imitations of a Southern accent. On Monday, when she got off work, he was waiting for her under the arch, hunched against the wind with newspapers stuffed in his vest, holding a rose.

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He gave her the rose. He gave her what she'd imagined—she was waltzing into Seventh Heaven in the arms of a blue-eyed stranger from the South, where they had plantations and moss in the trees. "You have the eyes of a banished princess," he told her. This was news to her. She'd never heard of *banished*. "Or a princess locked in a tower." It was the first time she ever reminded anybody except herself and Josie of any kind of princess.

Florida boy. *Mout' fulla mush*, her brothers said, when they met him. They didn't want him around, they didn't trust him, they didn't want him for her. Her brothers were the ones who sniffed around and found out he was divorced. He forgot to tell her that. But it was too late by then, she'd gotten used to her dream coming true, she couldn't give it up, she'd never find another one like him. So she forgave him, even though it meant she had to leave the Church and her beloved statues of the Virgin and St. Theresa and St. Catherine and Christ himself, dying on the cross, his beautiful white shoulders lifted, his arms stretched out with their long muscles and blue veins. She had prayed to God, and Gil was what God sent, so she figured it was all right with Him. His scarred heart reminded her a little of Christ's sacred wounded heart. And the way his head sometimes fell to one side, like Christ's, in His crown of thorns.

Her mother didn't speak much English. When Rosa took Gilbert home and showed them all her wedding ring, her mother held her hands over her heart, then crossed herself and wept. Rosa remembered her mother's square, foreign figure, and the mahogany veneer credenza behind her, where the candles burned in their red cups before the picture of the Virgin. The wedding ring on her mother's finger flashed in the candlelight when she crossed herself. *You should talk*, Rosa had thought. Posing at Uncle Rudy's in Michigan, in the doorway of the barn, looking into the distance with dreamy eyes, arms full of flowers. Forty-five years old, seven children, was too late for dreamy looks. Those hands like big white turnips hanging in the folds of her long silk skirt when she got married again finally to a man fifteen years younger than her that she

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brought in for Emma, and Emma wouldn't look at. *You should cross yourself for your own husband, where is he tonight?* she had thought meanly, when her mother cried about Gilbert.

Rosa was falling asleep in the green hospital chair. She got up to go home. She thought maybe she should lean over and kiss Gilbert, but in the end she just walked out the door, and down the empty hall, feeling light, as though she'd forgotten her purse, but there it was on her arm.

Nearly dawn when she got out to the deserted parking lot. She drove slowly, following the exit signs, and ended up at the door to the emergency room. She went back around, paying attention, but then she was at the emergency door again. Around and around, following the signs, doing what they said. She didn't get panicky, she wasn't surprised when she would come out once more at the side of the hospital. She just started through the turns again, a little faster. She couldn't see what she was doing wrong. She couldn't see what else to do. Finally, a young man in a uniform came out of the building and waved her down.

"I'm trying to get out," she told him, her heart pounding. "I don't know what I'm doing wrong."

He thought she was drunk, she knew. She held onto the steering wheel. He bent to look in the window at her, then shifted his weight and said, "Just go up to the end of the lane there, and turn left, ma'am."

"Thank you. I'm—" she knocked her knuckles against her forehead—"confused. My husband's in the hospital." She was talking too loud. She could tell by the way his eyes blinked and got polite.

He went through it again. Even so, she overshot the turn and bucked the car getting it into reverse. What he must think.

Going around and around like that. She was confused, she knew it. *Poor Rosa.* She had heard Gil tell the kids on the telephone, "Your mother's gotten so forgetful. She doesn't seem to take in what's said. She says the same thing over and over. I'm worried about her." She might be confused but she knew what *that* meant—poor Gilbert, stuck for life, worry about

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him. Maybe they ought to—"Are you trying to kill him?" That's what Dr. Jordan said.

At home she lay awake watching the darkness come away from the wall, the chairs. The mirror had light in it.

When she was five or six, she stole a ride on a bread wagon—they all did it, in her neighborhood. But that time, the wagon didn't stop at Mr. Vronka's store, where it usually did. It kept right on moving, turning corners, until she gave up hope. She hung on for dear life, as it carried her away from her neighborhood. She didn't dare jump off. When it finally stopped, she was in a part of town she'd never seen. She stood on the curb crying while the breadman yelled at her. She didn't understand that she was lost and could be taken back where she came from. She thought just the opposite—that where she came from was lost, the way you might lose a ball or a doll, forever. The breadman took her to the police station. Her knees shook, she thought they would lock her in jail for stealing the ride, but they took her home. At home, they hadn't missed her yet.

But that night, her mother let her sleep in the bed with her. She wound up the silver music box, the one that Rosa's father had brought from the Old Country when he came to marry Rosa's mother. She sat down on the edge of the bed with the music box in her lap, smoothing Rosa's hair while it played the old song. When it ran down, her mother wound it up again, and sat listening to it with her, over and over, singing the words a little, until Rosa fell asleep.

The fever scarred my heart, Rosa.

She and Gil got married. How long after that, five years? Nancy just an infant, Tommy maybe two. And Gilbert there at the dinner table tinkling his spoon against the side of his coffee cup and saying, "The craziest thing happened today."

The pretty bungalow off Ogden Avenue, the nice backyard. The kitchen they had painted yellow, with the breakfast set from Carl and Shirley. *A sweet little nest.*

She would bundle the children up and put them both in the buggy and take them to meet the street-car when Gil came home. When the children were in bed, she and Gil would

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smoke a cigarette and dance to the music on the radio. Sometimes they would sit at the table till all hours, drinking coffee, while Gil told her stories. How Guy Lombardo came into the furniture department of Marshall Field, where Gil was working by then, to buy a studio couch, and complimented Gil for being such a knowledgeable salesman. Or how Gil had told somebody off, in no uncertain terms.

His soft Southern voice, his handsome face with its boyish features, his white teeth and quick blue eyes. He was different from the people around her, her rough, sturdy brothers—playful, light on his feet, full of nonsense. He could talk to anybody, he had graduated college. He knew how to express himself, he used beautiful English. She was trying to improve her grammar, to say "this" instead of "dis." To improve her manners, her way of eating. He took her to Florida to meet his family. They were all thin, and lived in houses with big cool rooms and screened porches, and the women all wore light-colored plaid dresses. They sat under the trees and fanned themselves and drank iced tea with slices of orange in it. They sat mending, smiling at their needles while Gil talked to them. "Well, I swan," they would say, cooing like a bunch of pigeons.

His life was wonderful to her, full of adventures and strange doings. "The craziest thing happened today," he said, this time, and so she sat right down and opened out a newspaper on the table and started paring apples.

This time it was about walking down Michigan Avenue during his lunch hour and hearing someone calling, "Gil! Gil Cannon!" He turned around and *who* should come running up to him but his old skipper from the banana boat! He threw his arms around Gil and said—she remembered the exact words to this day—"What in tarnation are you doing in *this* burg?" So they went and had a cup of coffee together and then, *out of the blue*, the skipper had invited him to join his crew, as second mate.

And offered him three times what he was earning at Marshall Field!

Dumb her, she sat there, still nodding, the smile still pasted

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across her face, an apple in her hand, half pared, as he told her, in a chipper voice, that the skipper's boat was leaving Tampa, destination Rio, at the end of that very month of November.

He took a drink of coffee, in a pleased way, and put the cup back down. Then, for a minute he said nothing, as though he had just caught on to the meaning of what he was saying, needed a little time to put a new light in his eyes. "I've thought it over, Rosa. I don't see how in the world I can turn down an offer like that. Do you?"

She looked at the apple parings, trying to think if there was any answer she could give to that question. Finally she got up her courage and asked, "What about your heart?"

"My job will be mostly paperwork." Then he added, to put her in her place, "Skipper knows about my heart condition better than anyone, of course. When I had malaria, he couldn't have worried about me more if I'd been his own son." He looked down at his cup and went on, in a nice humble voice, "In fact, he told me this afternoon that he had always thought of me as the son he never had." He put his hand down on the table the way he did, admiring his fingernails, it looked like. "We'll have a lot more money to live on than we have now. It's just that I'll only be here between trips." She got up, without a plan. How long it took to get from Tampa to Brazil and back again was something she didn't know. She went to the sink, turned on the hot water. "About every five or six months, I suppose," he said, in back of her. "For a couple of weeks. Then I'll have to turn right around and do it all again." He wasn't even trying to sound sad. He sounded excited. Like they should both be excited, for the wonderful new life he was going to have. She felt her face breaking into pieces, just like a plate. She stood running hot water over her hands, holding her shoulders rigid so that they wouldn't shake, thinking of her life with him that he didn't want.

Oh, she won. Her big victory, it wasn't that hard. She forgot how.

No, she remembered. Down on her knees, that's how. She had thought that any minute he would turn, button his coat,

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and walk out the door. "The chance," he was saying, "the chance of a lifetime. I've got to take it." *No* was all she thought, *no* all through her, making her that heavy, that she fell on her knees, *no* and *no* and *no* coming out of her, big ugly sobs, tears running down her face, down her dress, *Don't leave, don't go, what would I do, two small babies, don't*, and his face bent toward her then, scared, his blue eyes wide open. Gathering her up into his arms. She won, oh yes. "Don't, Rosa," he pleaded, his own eyes full of tears. "Don't. That's enough. I'm not going. Forgive me, dear." Later he said, "I'll call Skipper at his hotel, first thing tomorrow, and tell him it's out of the question. It was just such a surprise—it swept me off my feet."

"Although," he said, shaking his head, his eyes narrowed as though they were looking across the sea to Brazil, "although that job would have been the making of me."

"You won't be sorry," she promised him.

He never mentioned the banana boat again, after that night. She had loved him for that, for not holding it against her, all he might have done, if she hadn't held him back.

Then, five years later, Gilbert had three heart attacks in a row. They moved back to his hometown in Florida, on the doctor's advice. They stayed the first few months with his brother Branham and Branham's wife Virginia, until Gilbert found work and got on his feet.

She and Virginia, knitting socks for the prisoners of war out of khaki yarn from the Red Cross, making meat loaves, walking Ton, the English bull that Rosa taught to sing the scale. Folding sheets together at the clothesline. "When Gilbert had malaria in Brazil," Rosa mentioned.

"What?"

"When he was on the banana boat."

Virginia came ducking through the laundry, laughing. "Rosa! The banana boat!" she said, in her Southern, amazed voice. She must have seen the look on Rosa's face; anyway, she stopped laughing. "Oh my dear," she said, putting her arms around her, and then stepped back, as if she'd thought it over and made a decision, and snapped down the words the way

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she snapped down her discards in gin rummy: "Gilbert was never on any banana boat." She thought about it and then added, "He never had malaria, either." She started walking Rosa to the house, holding her hand. "Something was wrong with his heart when he was a child," she explained. "They thought they were going to lose him, don't you know. He had to spend a lot of time in bed, poor little fellow, and so he read a lot. I think that's why he's always had such an active imagination. I've never held it against him, myself." Rosa didn't tell Virginia about the night she had begged him to stay, down on her knees. She wondered if Virginia would have held *that* against him.

The curtains in the bedroom blew out now in the little dawn breeze. She thought, "They'll be blowing out like that on the day I die. I'll be right here, in this bed."

First he told her that he'd gotten malaria in a jungle in Brazil, and she married him. Then he said he was leaving her and going back there, and she begged him on her knees not to go. And later, when she found out it was all a lie, a terrible lie—what had she done then?

She'd told Virginia she was going to take a little nap and climbed the stairs to the hot second story, where they slept. She'd gotten the bottle of scotch out of the bureau drawer, taken two aspirins and washed them down with a slug from the bottle, and then lain down across the bed, on her back, with her hands behind her head. She'd felt nothing, only the hot sun through the yellow shade and the grey thick pain that rose up into her head and throbbed there. The heat and the liquor together made her sick. She threw up, at last, then washed her face and hands and brushed her teeth, never looking in the mirror. She went back downstairs, took the electric fan onto the back porch and ironed clothes all afternoon, headache or no headache, every last handkerchief and pillowcase, folded each one, thumped the iron back down on it to crease it into a neat square. *Least said soonest mended*, she told herself. When Gilbert came home from work that night,

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she asked him if they could go to the movies after dinner, and they did.

She let him off easy.

Years later, the doctors at Johns Hopkins discovered that Gilbert had been born with a hole in his heart. Even then, when they walked out of the doctor's office together, she didn't bring up the malaria, the banana boat. A closed subject.

And then came the time when he started having to run over to Lakeland two or three times a week to talk to his accountant, John Soto. Back at dinnertime, whistling.

The mockingbird was sitting in the golden rain tree, pulling every trick out of his bag. She thought she might as well get up. The light came over the wet grass. The red flowers on the hibiscus bushes opened here and there where the sun touched them.

She'd never heard of Florida until she was twenty-four.

She sat in the little cane chair, pulling on her panty hose. Her thick shadow rippled on the pale blue rug. Everything in this house was light—rattan, antiques from Gilbert's people, rockers of pine and oak, spindle beds, silver and glass that caught the light. A dream come true. No, just a dream sometimes, when she woke up, at first. A strange house. Light, not dark. Light, not heavy. Everything here was light, blowing away, words flew around her head, they were nothing, gnats. She didn't listen anymore. Her own mind had blown away, too. Going around and around the parking lot like that. It was a shame.

They'd had good times, sometimes, anyway. The bad with the good. *Three wonderful children*, where were they? Not here. They had flitted through these rooms on their way to their strange lives—Tom, divorced, in an old log cabin in Montana, with an outhouse and only a wood stove for heat; Nancy, also divorced, no children, by herself on a houseboat on the Ohio River that any tramp could break into and rape her; Stephen, unmarried yet, at thirty-four, down in West Palm Beach, running three times a week to that little church where

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he led the singing, no piano allowed. Stephen came to visit once a month, to talk to her about Jesus. "Don't you want eternal life, Mom?" "No," she told him. "I wouldn't want the trouble. I just want to rest." "That's what eternal life *is*, Mom, rest and joy." Stephen didn't know when to shut up anymore. "Rest in the bosom of Abraham." Who taught him that kind of talk? She could imagine heaven with Mary in it, all the saints, Christ with his halo and stigmata, music from a big organ and a thousand voices singing out over the golden altar. But that was gone, and Stephen's heaven, with no piano, wasn't for her. "I just want to rest in the ground, Stephen. I just want to forget about it."

She couldn't imagine anything heavier than having to be Rosa, Rosa, Rosa, through all eternity.

None of her children had found true love. Once she had said this to Tom, tears in her eyes, and he laughed and said, "*God*, you're full of sentimental drivel, Mom."

She put on her dark blue pants, her nice dark-blue and crimson T-shirt. She slipped her dendrite from Brazil around her neck on its silver chain. She hated her arms, covered with dark hair, her short bowed legs and crooked toes from wearing shoes that were too small when she was a kid. Now she was old, with the same crooked toes from sixty, seventy years ago. They'd still be crooked when she was dead. A crooked-toed skeleton. Unless she was cremated. That's what Gil wanted. He wanted his ashes to be scattered over the Gulf of Mexico. Her lids drooped over her brown eyes. The eyes of a princess locked in a tower, ha.

She leaned into the mirror, smoothed on her lipstick with her little finger the way she had done ever since she was a young girl, a 1920s girl. She'd had her life, it stretched back. "Face it, Nancy, your mother's an old woman," she had said on the telephone the other day. "Nobody lasts forever, kid." Gilbert would go first, though. Not this time, but another.

Faraway places with strange-sounding names. She remembered his face, so intelligent, so happy, as he bent to the road map, marking the roads they would take to get to Devil's Lake,

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in Michigan, in her brother-in-law John Bonnelli's car that they borrowed. Later, with the kids hanging over his shoulder, he was always sitting at the dining-room table, a map spread out in the lamplight, tracing with his little finger the road they were going to take to get somewhere, Grand Canyon, Niagara Falls, telling them what they'd see along the way and where they were going to stop.

He should have had a clean life on the high seas.

She should have had a nice husband who didn't lie all the time. And who didn't cheat on her.

A little boy in bed, reading adventure books. Why didn't he *go* then? When he grew up? He could have gotten a job on a boat, couldn't he? Maybe, because of his heart, they wouldn't hire him, or maybe he didn't think he was strong enough. So he lived an adventurous life in his mind, made up stories, and turned into a talker. A blowhard, a liar.

Or maybe he was too lazy. Maybe all he ever really wanted was to talk about it, not do it.

"Well, I'm staying here," she had told him, yesterday. "That's final." Which was when he went out to edge the lawn.

A nice cup of coffee and a roll was what she wanted for breakfast. A good fresh sweet roll, like what they ate in Chicago when she was a kid, from her Aunt Jewel's bakery, with prunes and flakes of coconut and nice slivered almonds on top.

She couldn't figure out. What would have happened if she'd been another kind of woman, able to say, with no anger, no fear, "You're right. The chance of a lifetime, go and make three times as much as at Marshall Field, and when you come back we'll paint the town. But let's just get it fixed up so those checks come through, honey." Where would he have gone, no skipper, no banana boat? Would she have called his bluff, would he have stayed, made a big production out of deciding to stay? Or walked out the door forever?

If he'd walked out the door, she wouldn't have seen him again, she was pretty sure. And then what would have happened to her?

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She was standing now in front of the open refrigerator, with no idea why, the jar of instant coffee in her hand. She got out the milk and closed the door, put some cornflakes in a bowl.

They'd seen the world, anyway. They'd been to Majorca, Spain, Portugal, Mexico, England, Hawaii—she couldn't remember. To Brazil. He couldn't get enough of Brazil. She'd lost track of how many times they went there.

Once, in Brazil, they took a tram up a mountain to see that famous statue of Christ. On the way down, the power went out and all the passengers had to get off and walk back to the station in the dark. Rosa fell into an open manhole and hurt herself, and had to walk, Gilbert and a Brazilian man who didn't speak English half carrying her, all the rest of the way down the mountain into the station. Finally she had fainted from the pain. She'd thought she was dying. It turned out she'd cracked two ribs. They took her to the hospital, and then from the hospital to the hotel in an ambulance. Gilbert was wonderful that time, staying close beside her, bringing her her meals in bed, going to get the prescriptions filled. She'd gotten up as soon as she could walk without fainting, and gone with him everywhere again, her chest tightly bandaged. She felt glad that he was so proud of her. "This gal *here*," he told the children, when they got back home, "is the bravest mortal God ever made."

She was brave about some things.

Her faraway place had always been a man. He spent his childhood reading books about adventure; she spent hers wrapped up in organdy curtains, making up something that would happen. She couldn't remember what, exactly. Some big romance. To be waltzed away from herself, or into herself, in the arms of a man. In the arms of the man of her dreams. That was what they all wanted, the girls, when she was young.

All she wanted anymore was just what she had, and to keep it.

She couldn't remember the names of all the places they'd been. He came back and showed his slides to the Kiwanis Club, told about his trips to anyone who happened to drop

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by. *The bluest water I have ever seen, the finest fish I ever put in my mouth, bar none.* The excited voice, wanting nothing but to go on and on, and be listened to, with respect. He said what he had to say, to get attention. That they'd been invited to a party for Sophia Loren, when they'd really only overheard somebody talking about it in the bar. "Oh?" she would say, rolling her eyes at whoever else was in the room, to warn them. "*I* don't remember that." Only now she didn't even remember the things that really happened, so nobody took her warning.

Her blood had heaviness in it. It sank into silence. The more he talked, the further she sank down into the thing like a well, alone down there, wanting less and less. Words were only the blizzard that flew around her head. She paid more attention to the mockingbird.

Stupid woman, Gil had said once, in a loud voice, right out on the street. Once, when he was mad at her. She wasn't stupid, except about men. She earned her living from when she was fourteen until she was six months gone with Tommy and before she went to work, eleven, twelve, she was already taking care of a house and the two little boys. She had the best handwriting in school. Once, when the regular girl was absent, the nuns asked her to play the piano for the children to march into their classes in the morning. And she'd never had a lesson, just picked it up, by ear.

From outside the door of his room, she saw him sitting up, spooning oatmeal into his mouth. He was smiling his twinkling, devilish Ike grin at the nurse, a short, older woman, like herself. The nurse smiled at her, going out of the room, and whispered, "He's much better."

When he caught sight of Rosa, he pressed his lips together and held out his hand—they should celebrate, he was still alive.

"You look pretty good, for an old man," she said to him, in a jolly voice.

His face shaded over with a sharp, displeased look. He'd had a close call, she shouldn't forget.

"Did you get some sleep?"

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"For a few hours. They woke me up to do some tests." He picked up his glass of orange juice. "Dr. Jordan's not completely satisfied with my condition."

"Oh."

He looked down into his glass, swirling the orange juice like it was a scotch on the rocks. He was waiting for her, he wanted her to show how worried she was. She felt tired, tired. Fooling with this crazy man all her life. She put her face down into the overnight case she had packed, started taking out his new pajamas, his clean underwear. She felt suddenly clammy, sick. She sat down in the chair in the corner, pressed her cold fingers into her eyes. Begging him like that, down on her knees, not to leave her.

"Rosa, are you all right?" She was scaring *him* now. She couldn't help it. She couldn't think about it.

"Rosa?" His voice was full of fright. Real fright, not made-up. He cared about her. He wanted to take care of her, he *had* taken care of her, all these years, but she couldn't think about it. She felt sick, sick, for her life. She pressed her cold fingers up against the bony ridges where her forehead began, trying to remember herself in the old days, before she started turning into this other one, this dull, heavy, confused one. A nice young woman in a crimson dress, wanting romance, love, marriage, children, what they all wanted, back then. *I'll be loving you, always. With a love that's true, always.*

What had she meant, what had any of them meant? They hadn't known—something wonderful, that was all. Something real, of their own.

Down on her knees, to keep what she had, to keep what she had from walking out the door on her, those big sobs coming out of her. Maybe that was part of what the songs had taught her, that pain. The blues. Heartbreak. But later, ironing those clothes all afternoon, that wasn't the blues, there was no song about the sick heavy headache, about waiting for him to come home from work so that she could begin to pretend not to know what she knew. She'd pretended all these years.

Fear and fear and fear making a liar out of *her*, too. There would never be an end to it now. It was too late to untangle

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her life from his. Like trying to untangle the roots of two plants growing a long time in the same pot. In five years they'd both be dead. No use.

But it wasn't that. *Never too late*, she heard the stern words—even now, at the end, it was fear. Even now, not to lose.

But what if he made her leave her house? What then? What then?

It wouldn't happen. She wasn't going to leave, and he wouldn't leave without her. She knew it. She'd seen that little look of fear he sucked back into his eyes when she said, "Go then."

He wouldn't have left that other time, either, but she hadn't known it, then. Too dumb. He had no place to go. He'd just wanted the *idea* of it, poor man: that something like that could happen to some poor so-and-so walking through the Loop in the icy wind, on his lonely lunch hour from selling furniture, and then home to the little bungalow off Ogden. He just got started and didn't know when to stop. And her, down on her knees saying, "Don't go! Don't leave us!" What a chump. Guy Lombardo had never come into the furniture department, either.

She took her hands away from her eyes, rubbed them together, hard. "You're pale!" he cried. "I'm going to ring for the nurse."

"No, I'm okay now. I just got woozy for a minute."

He looked at her still. He didn't know what to do, he put his hand on her forehead. Her head ached, but the wave of nausea had passed. She took a deep breath; she got a tissue and dried her face. "Hey," she said, "that's a cute outfit, mister. Hubba hubba. Let's see what it looks like from the back."

He told everybody all day long, "Rosa has simply worried herself *sick*."

"Look," she said. "I brought the paper for you. And a deck of cards." There was nothing wrong with him. She wasn't going to act sympathetic.

"Hot diggity dog," he said, rubbing his hands together.

People dropped in through the day. He was in a bright, joking mood. The center of attention. He forgot about the doctor

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not being satisfied with his condition. He turned *not* being at death's door into a way to get attention. In between visits, they played gin rummy. He got mad at her for forgetting what she'd discarded. "Thank you very much," he'd say, picking up the queen of spades. "I just *took* the jack."

"Oh so what. I'll still win."

Dr. Jordan came in in the afternoon and said he could go home the next morning. Gilbert turned to her, pretending to be overjoyed instead of disappointed. "Rosa," he said, for Dr. Jordan's benefit, "I want you to be here at eight-thirty sharp. Really and truly," he told Dr. Jordan, "I don't know when in my life I've been so anxious to be home."

"You know what?" he asked, later. She shook her head, staring at the bedrail. She couldn't look at him. "Even that damned old yard will look pretty good to me."

She nodded. "I'll get everything ready for you," she said, from a little distance, feeling formal.

There were many other cars leaving the parking lot that night; she only had to follow the leader.

She wished she hadn't begged that time, but it was over now. It was like wishing she had been a different person.

She didn't have any pictures of herself as a child, but later on, after work sometimes, she would pose in the photo booth at the dime store, in her shingled haircut with the fingerwaves set in, or her plaid wool dress with the fancy white collar. Nobody took her picture, so she took her own, smiling in her new velvet beret at some imaginary sweetheart. A thin girl with big sad brown eyes. Not meant to live alone. Gilbert had found these little snapshots, the size of postage stamps, and pasted them all on one page of the photograph album he started when they got married. At the bottom of the page he wrote, *Ten Good Reasons for Coming to Chicago.*

She'd gotten what she prayed for. They'd had their long life together, three wonderful children. They'd had good times together, sometimes. He'd cheated on her, but he came back and begged her to forgive him. She took him back.

But she never forgave him. Couldn't forgive and couldn't let

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go, either. Took him back, but kept up her savings account, just in case.

He wouldn't leave. They'd be together for the rest of their lives. In the empty house, she made herself a stiff bourbon and water and drank it at the kitchen sink, then poured herself another little jigger, so she would sleep this time, and took it into the bedroom. She sat back against the pillows, sipping it. Maybe it could be funny now, though it hadn't been funny at the time. A banana boat. You really had to laugh. Poor lying Gilbert, poor dumb scared Rosa, so long ago. Now they were old and still together, hooray, one with no mind, the other crazy.

Such are the vicissitudes, she thought, but in her chest was something tight, like a fist, a tight, angry sorrow for her life, almost done with now.

What if she hadn't cried that time? What if she hadn't begged? What if he'd left? What kind of life would she have had? She'd never even tried to imagine it. Not an easy one, maybe a sad one. No trips, no college for the kids, maybe not even enough to eat. Back to work at the telephone company. No father for them, no husband for her. No little Stephen coming along to make her glad as her hair turned grey.

But they would have survived, she guessed, the three of them, Tom and Nancy and her, Rosa Dubina. She hadn't even considered it. "No," was all she had considered.

"It all seems like a dream," she'd say, walking through the strange streets of Brazil. But she'd gotten something out of it, too. They had seen those falls down there, they'd gone down that river, and one night, that time she cracked her ribs, she'd heard piano music playing over a loudspeaker from the movie house across from the hotel. A simple little song, but it halted and turned in a sweet, surprising way. The record played over and over, she didn't get tired of it. It was late. Gilbert, after a long day of staying by her bed, had gone down to the hotel bar. "I think I'll see if I can scare up somebody to shoot the breeze with," he'd said. She sat by herself, the wide bandage wound tightly around her rib cage. In the dark, at the open

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window, one floor above the square, she had sat watching the people who lived in the town strolling by. Sometimes a voice would float up to her. A woman with brown hair in a braid around her head came along the street with some loaves of bread in a basket; *That could be me*, she'd thought, suddenly, and maybe because she was so weak, or so full of painkillers, the life of that woman filled her up: she walked through the crowd with long strides, her flowered skirt swinging against her legs. She went in a door. Rosa imagined her putting the bread down on a table, turning and striking a match to light the stove.

Rosa had sat at that window for a long time, her hands on the wide sill, enjoying herself. The bells of the old church rang out eleven times, but still small children ran around. A man with a little white pony was giving rides around the square. He had a red scarf tied around his neck, and the pony had one, too, to match. Rosa still remembered one little girl, four or five years old, in a yellow dress and bright blue tights. As the man lifted her down from the pony, he swung her around and around; her little blue legs flew out, she screamed a high, excited scream.

Rosa had sat there at the window until she heard Gilbert's key in the lock. Then she pulled the curtains together and lay down on the bed with her eyes closed. She didn't want to hear what had happened in the bar. She didn't want to tell him about the little girl—it would just turn into one of his stories. She lay beside him with her eyes closed, listening to the song playing over and over. She lay still and breathed in and out.

Ten, fifteen years ago, that was. The little girl would be a young woman by now.

The bourbon had made Rosa lightheaded. Her body seemed to float up a little way from her bones, to turn as the room was turning, in sliding circles. She switched off the lamp and laid her head back carefully on the pillow. No breath in this room now but her own. She stared for a minute into the empty sliding darkness, then closed her eyes against it. Something still turned like a slow ferris wheel behind her eyes. It

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made her feel sick. To take her mind off of it, she remembered—just in her head, not out loud—that sweet melody from the movie house. The white pony. The little girl in blue stockings, swinging out, swinging out, screaming for joy.

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Five Journals by Charles Wright

Silent Journal

Inaudible consonant inaudible vowel
The word continues to fall
in splendor around us
Window half shadow window half moon
back yard like a book of snow
That holds nothing and that nothing holds
Immaculate text
not too prescient not too true

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December Journal

God is not offered to the senses,
St. Augustine tells us,
The artificer is not his work, but is his art:
Nothing is good if it can be better.
But all these oak trees look fine to me,
this Virginia cedar
Is true to its own order
And ghosts a unity beyond its single number.
This morning's hard frost, whose force is nowhere
absent, is nowhere present.
The undulants cleanse themselves in the riverbed,
The mud-striders persevere,
the exceptions provide.

I keep coming back to the visible.
I keep coming back
To what it leads me into,
The music inside the violin,
the hymn in the hymnal,
The object, sequence and consequence.
By being exactly what it is,
It is that other, inviolate self we yearn for,
Itself and more than itself,
the word inside the word.
It is the tree and what the tree stands in for, the
blank,
The far side of the last equation.

Black and brown of December,
umber and burnt orange
Under the spoked trees, front yard
Pollocked from edge-feeder to edge run,
Central Virginia beyond the ridgeline spun with
a back light
Into indefinition,
charcoal and tan, damp green . . .

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Entangled in the lust of the eye,
we carry this world with us wherever we go,
Even into the next one:
Abstraction, the highest form, is the highest good:
Everything's beautiful that stays in its due order,
Every existing thing can be praised
when compared with nothingness.

The seasons roll from my tongue—
Autumn, winter, the *integer vitae* of all that's in vain,
Roll unredeemed.
Rain falls. The utmost
Humps out to the end of nothing's branch, crooks there like
an inch-worm,
And fingers the emptiness.
December drips through my nerves,
a drumming of secondary things
That spells my name right,
heartbeat
Of slow, steady consonants.
Trash cans weigh up with water beside the curb,
Leaves flatten themselves against the ground
and take cover.

How are we capable of so much love
for things that must fall away?
How can we utter our mild retractions and still keep
Our wasting affection for this world?
Augustine says
This is what we desire,
The soul itself instinctively desires it.
He's right, of course,
No matter how due and exacting the penance is.
The rain stops, the seasons wheel
Like stars in their bright courses:
the cogitation of the wise

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Will bind you and take you where you will not want to go.
Mimic the juniper, have mercy.

The tongue cannot live up to the heart:
Raise the eyes of your affection to its affection
And let its equivalents
ripen in your body.
Love what you don't understand yet, and bring it to you.

From somewhere we never see comes everything that we do see.
What is important devolves
from the immanence of infinitude
In whatever our hands touch—
The other world is here, just under our fingertips.

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Primitive Journal

There is a heaviness behind the eyes
deep as death
And without vaccine
That sends the weight of afternoon to its earthly knees
And empties the veins of all remorse
And pity it is so strong
in its instinct and gravity.

There is a weariness in us
dark as undoing
That flakes down like a snowfall.
In April, under the apple trees
And their doilied, blanked blossoms,
It fills us beyond our knowing,
oppressive as purity.

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Language Journal

Late February, 5 o'clock: the cantaloupe-colored light,
Light of martyrs and solitaries,
Lies like a liquid on the trees
as though ladled there.
Jerome,
at large in a light like this,
Cold Mountain and Paul of Thebes
Drifting like small flames back toward the sun,
Would feel at ease
momentarily
In their uninterruptible avenue and dance.
The cars slide past on their golden wheels
Down Locust.
The joggers go by and grain into radiance.

The leaves of the rhododendron
dangle like reliquaries,
Gilded and stained in their little piles
As though spurted upon
by the cleave from a saint's head,
The surface of everything
Hovering above itself in an expiation of held breath
As the body of afternoon is borne back to the hills.
Sunday, stub-end of winter,
baroque in its seal and dazzle,
Despair like an underpainting across the landscape,
These days we define ourselves inside,
These afternoons of last light
through which we all depend.

Maybe the theorists are right:
everything comes from language,
The actual web of root and rain
Is just an afterimage
pressed on the flyleaf of a book,

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This first, pale envelope of forsythia unglued
By the March heat
only a half-thought apostrophe
And not the flesh of experience:
Nothing means anything, the slip of phrase against phrase
Contains the real way our lives
Are graphed out and understood,
the transformation of adverb
To morpheme and phoneme is all we need answer to.

But I don't think so today,
unless the landscape is language
Itself, which it isn't.
The water beads necklaced across the bare branch of this oak tree
Have something to say now
but not about syllables,
For water they are, and to water they shall return.
Out of sight, out of earshot, along the vertical axis
Of meaning,
the music of what's real,
The plainsong of being, is happening all the while.
The verb that waits for us in the trees
is reconstruct, not deconstruct:
The sound of one hand clapping is the sound of one hand clapping.

Umbria mistica . . . What I remember is how
I remember it:
from Spello to Collepino across to Assisi
Over the humpback whole of Monte Subasio,
Bird bone and twig dry,
dust swirls like ghosts of penitents
Working the switchbacks and hairpins down to the sanctuary,
The cowl of mid-August heat
like cloth on our bodies:

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Who couldn't hallucinate in such an ascetic landscape?
Seductive as pain, sharp-edged as guilt,
Its deprivations are palpable in the sunlight:
Nothing's so sweet as self-denial,
nothing so bountiful . . .

What is it we never can quite put our finger on
Inside the centricity of surface
that foregrounds and drains
The abstracts we balance our lives by?
Whatever it is, the language is only its moan.
Whatever it is, the self's trace
lingers along it
Much in the way that lies live in lines,
That air's in the atmosphere and wine's in this grape I pick now
From the vine beside me,
Perugia darkening out of sight,
Assisi darkening out of sight,
Raggio verde cutlassing down
as it must have done before.

To be of use, not to be used by,
the language sighs,
The landscape sighs, the wide mouth
Of March sighs at the ear of evening,
Whose eye has that look of eternity in its gaze.
To be of use,
look of eternity in its gaze,
Not to be used by . . .
This English is not the king's English,
it doesn't dissemble.
If anything means nothing, nothing means anything,
Full moon in the sky
Like a golden period.

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It doesn't dissemble.

Late March, spring's loop in a deep regress,
Sunlight like polyurethane
on the concrete blocks
And the driveway's asphalt curve . . .
I step through the alphabet
The tree limbs shadow across the grass,
a dark language
Of strokes and ideograms
That spells out a different story than we are used to,
A story with no beginning and no end,
a little one.
I leave it and cross the street.
I think it's a happy story,
and not about us.

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Last Journal

Out of our own mouths we are sentenced,
we who put our trust in visible things.

Soon enough we will forget the world.
And soon enough the world will forget us.

The breath of our lives, passing from this one to that one,
Is what the wind says, its single word
being the earth's delight.

Lust of the tongue, lust of the eye,
out of our own mouths we are sentenced . . .

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Snow

James Lasdun

My great-uncle Dominic, the inventor, took me into the small workshop that stood between the back of his house and the large kitchen garden behind it. "This will amuse you," he said, pointing to a box-shaped contraption with what looked like a headlamp encased in it. "It's called a stroboscope. They are going to become very popular." He switched on an electric drill, and brought it into the flashing, acetylene-blue light of the contraption. With his free hand he adjusted the frequency of the flashing, and I watched, enchanted, as the drill-bit appeared to slow gradually down to a complete halt. "There, you see," he said, "it renders the most violent things harmless. Touch the drill, go on . . . "

Such was his solicitude, however, that before I had raised my small hand a fraction, he clutched it with his own. "Now let this serve as a lesson to you. Watch . . ." He brought a piece of wood from the workbench to the motionless drill-bit. A harsh rasping came as the one contacted the other, a flashlit spray of sawdust plumed out in a staggered curve, and in a trice the innocent piece of metal had bitten clean through the

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inch-thick piece of wood. "There you are. If something looks peaceful then leave it alone or else you get crucified. The stroboscope makes machines look still because it only illuminates one point in their cycle. Terrible accidents happen in factories where they have flickering neon lights . . . Now I must go and have a nap before Inge and I go out."

Uncle Dominic was a man of extraordinary mildness. Family legend has it that his only retort to the irresponsible nurse in whose charge his son drowned forty-five years ago was, "If this sort of thing happens again you'll have to go." He made his fortune when the patent for a guidance device he had invented was purchased by an aeronautical company, which then adapted it for use in naval missiles. After the war he calculated that he had been instrumental in the deaths of some twenty thousand people. The fact haunted him. He wrote countless letters to the press warning scientists to guard their discoveries from the military, and was much ridiculed for them. In an oddly inverted piece of *folie de grandeur*, he papered his workshop with the dead and wounded of Hiroshima, as if he had been personally responsible for the carnage. The projects he worked on became increasingly trifling, as his concern over their possible abuse grew more obsessive. That winter he had perfected a machine for feeding minced chicken, at twelve-hourly intervals, to Salome, his beloved Persian Blue, so that he and his second wife Inge could take short holidays without troubling the neighbors to look after the animal.

He had also built the prototype of a hair-plaiting device for Inge, and as we returned from the cold workshop to the warm house, we heard Inge shouting from the bedroom upstairs—"Come and get this wretched machine out of my hair. It's stuck—" Uncle Dominic quickened his pace, then checked himself. "I mustn't run," he said to me, "you go and help her."

Inge, twenty-six years my great-uncle's junior, sat at her dressing table in a blue silk *peignoir* embroidered with tiny bright humming birds, the plaiting device sticking incongruously from her long golden hair. "Ah. Little Thomas," she said, "how sweet you are . . ." I stood behind her disentangling the

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golden strands from the silver tines of the device as gently as I could. "None of his machines work these days," she whispered, as Uncle Dominic's footsteps approached the door.

He fell instantly asleep on the bed, while Inge had me brush her hair with her soft, ivory-handled hairbrush, and plait it with my own hands. I can remember wanting to tell her how lovely I thought she was, but having the courage only to let my all-licensed hands linger in that gleaming floss some moments longer than were necessary. She coiled the braid into a bun, and fixed it with two tourmaline pins. "Now go," she said, "while I dress," and kissed me on my forehead.

I saw them off from the front entrance; my great-uncle immaculate in evening dress, black of his tall gaunt frame and the silver hair repeated in his tipped ebony stick; Inge's sable stole collecting the first white crystals of the frozen evening. "We won't be long," she called to me from the bottom of the marble steps, "Anne-Marie will look after you. If Mr. Morpurgo arrives before we do, then . . . offer him a drink." She climbed into the car giggling at the thought, and they drove off to their cocktail party.

I sat on the living-room sofa drawing Christmas cards for them, while Anne-Marie—or Claire or Gabrielle—buffed silver knives and piled them on a salver where they gleamed like fish spilt from a net.

Mr. Morpurgo, their dinner guest, did arrive before Dominic and Inge. He wore, as I remember, a yellow suit with pieces of brown suede clasping the shoulders and elbows. His face was a porous, piecemeal assemblage of unrelated features that could never agree on one expression. Smiles dissolved into scowls then into parodies of misery, swiftly, and with no apparent reason. He was the kind of man who awakens in children their first sensations of snobbery. I offered him a drink, and when he asked jovially if I was joining him, I declined with a delicious sense of disdain. He addressed me as "little man," but I knew he had only been invited out of pity, because his wife had left him, and it was Christmas Eve, and he happened to live across the garden. He tried to flirt with the au pair, but she feigned ignorance of English. He put on a French accent,

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as if that would help, and she quickly found an excuse to leave the room. He wandered about picking up and examining ornaments from shelves, and when I intimated that the silver-and-glass-framed wedding portrait of Dominic and Inge he'd pulled from its hook was fragile and perhaps rather special to them, he made a great show of replacing it exactly as he'd found it, smirking at me while he did so. "Whatever the little man says," he added, and in an attempt to amuse, clicked his heels together and saluted me.

The slam of the front door brought in Dominic and Inge, rosy-cheeked and vibrant from their cocktail party. As they greeted Mr. Morpurgo, apologizing for their lateness, I watched the powdery snow on Inge's stole melting into tiny seed pearls that clung, sparkling, to the wet tips of fur. The arrowheads of her pale blue high heels were rimmed with moisture, and I remember this pleasing me, because it meant the snow was settling.

At dinner, Mr. Morpurgo tried to draw out my Uncle Dominic on the subject of his pacifism. "Go on, admit it," he kept saying, with what was presumably intended to be a roguish grin, "you're deluding yourself. No real progress has ever been made in the name of peace or love. Greed, aggression and lust—that's what motivates people. We're beasts really—I'm one, I don't deny it. I organize my life and work accordingly. Stab your neighbor before he stabs you, that's the only way. Admit it, go on . . . " Out of courtesy, Uncle Dominic made a token defense of his position; the lazy, tail-swishing defense a horse makes against a mildly irritating fly, and it seemed entirely proper to me that he should not waste energy doing battle with so unworthy an adversary.

After dinner he dozed on the living-room sofa, Salome dozing on his lap, while Inge and Mr. Morpurgo played backgammon, quietly accusing one another of cheating, and giggling quietly so as not to wake Uncle Dominic. Mr. Morpurgo risked a stab at his sleeping host—"That's how he preserves his illusions is it—by sleeping most of his life, and only waking up for the good bits?" Inge smiled sadly at her husband and said nothing.

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As ever, no effort was made to send me to bed, although Mr. Morpurgo twice expressed his amazement at "the little man's stamina." I went, eventually, in the wake of Uncle Dominic who, roused by the bite of Salome's claws, declared himself a little sleepy and retired, wishing us all a happy Christmas. When Inge came up to say goodnight, she let me unpin her hair, unfurl it, and separate the three golden locks which she rustled back into one disheveled tress before returning to Mr. Morpurgo.

I found myself very suddenly wide awake long before the dawn of Christmas Day. I left opening my stocking until my great-uncle and aunt would have woken, and I could open it on their bed, the quilt wrapped about my shoulders, while they received my tribute of delight in return for their generosity. Through my bedroom window the dark blue sky with its sprinkling of stars coaxed pale shades of silver from the snow-covered garden and surrounding houses. The snow on the garden was pristine, except for a dotted line that ran across the center from our house to the one opposite, like the perforations between two stamps seen from their white, shiny backs.

I put on my slippers, went downstairs to investigate, and yes, parallel with two sets of snowed-over footprints leading out from the back door, past my great-uncle's workshop, was a set cut freshly into the crisp snow, the arrow heads pointing back into our house.

The significance of these footprints remained in chrysalis within me until the recent death of my great-uncle reminded me of the occasion; though by then I, like everyone else except perhaps Uncle Dominic, knew all about Inge's affair. The sight thus provided me with no sorrowful descent into knowledge. It did, however, give rise to a tableau which now seems a peculiarly expressive coda to my Uncle Dominic's life.

The busy Christmas morning rituals on the day itself demanded I put the image of the footprints temporarily out of mind. At lunch, though, it rose once more from its suppression. The ten or twelve assembled relatives had finished eating, and we were leaning back in our chairs telling stories and

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sipping *eiswein*. Whether it was an excess of that extraordinary distillation of frost-corrupted grapes, or the air's intoxicating fragrance of tangerine peel, burnt brandy, and cigar smoke, or the way the candle flames were splintered and multiplied in the table's debris of silver cutlery and dishes, I don't know; but something released in me the image of those tracks again, catalyzing a thought that seemed to me astoundingly clever, and well worth the immediate attention of the company.

"Uncle Dominic," I called out in my shrill voice. The table hushed, and my great-uncle's eyelids opened a crack. "Your stroboscope is like snow. There were footprints leading to the back door this morning when I got up, and I've just thought . . . " but to my chagrin the relatives at once resumed their conversations in unnecessarily loud voices. I piped louder, but my ingenious explanation—that all the action happens *between* the footprints, so that only the moments of stillness are made visible by the snow—was drowned by my relatives' voices that rose with mine, fell briefly at intervals when they thought I'd given up, then rose in chorus again as I persisted, so that all my Uncle Dominic was allowed to hear were the disjointed words that rang out during the brief pauses.

He looked perplexed for a moment, but made no attempt to hear more than the babble permitted and soon let his eyelids drop again. I was finally silenced by Inge's mother who asked me, with a fatuous (though unreturned) grin at her daughter, whether I thought those footprints might have been Father Christmas's. Mortified by this snub, I fell into a sulk from which I did not recover until I had flown back to my parents, who worked in a place where Christmas is not celebrated, and where snow has never been seen.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

FICTION

William Kittredge is a professor of creative writing at the University of Montana. His most recent book, *Owning It All*, a collection of personal essays, was published in 1987 by Graywolf Press.

James Lasdun's short-story collection, *Delirium Eclipse*, was published by Harper & Row last year. His poetry collection, *A Jump Start*, will be published by Norton next spring. His poems, stories, and reviews have appeared in *The Times Literary Supplement, Literary Review, Encounter, Firebird, Fiction Magazine*, and issue 103 of this magazine.

Mary Ann Taylor-Hall lives on a farm in Harrison County, Kentucky. She recently completed her first novel.

Russell Working is a co-winner of the 1986 Iowa Short Fiction Award. The University of Iowa Press published his collection of short stories, *Resurrectionists,* in April. Working is a reporter at *The Daily Courier* in Grants Pass, Oregon.

POETRY

Philip Levine has published numerous volumes of poetry, including *7 Years From Somewhere*, which won the National Book Critics Circle Award, and *Ashes*, which won both the National Book Critics Circle Award and the National Book Award. His latest collection, *A Walk with Tom Jefferson*, will be published this spring.

Federico García Lorca, one of the greatest Spanish writers of the twentieth century, died in 1936. These poems are from a new translation, by **Greg Simon** and **Steven L. White**, of his classic work, *Poet in New York*, edited by Christopher Maurer, to be published this winter by Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

Charles Wright's *Zone Journals* will be published by Farrar, Straus & Giroux this winter. He teaches at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville.

FEATURE

Lawrence Shainberg is the author of the novel *One on One* (Holt, Rinehart & Winston), and *Brain Surgeon: An Intimate View of His World* (Lippincott). He has just completed a novel, *Memories of Amnesia.*

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INTERVIEWS

Shusha Guppy is the London Editor of *The Paris Review*, and a regular contributor to the *Daily Telegraph*, British *Vogue*, and other periodicals.
Barbara Thompson's short stories have been published in the *Pushcart Prize* anthologies VII and IX, and *Shenandoah Anthology: From the First 35 Years*. Her interview with Katherine Anne Porter appeared in *Writers at Work*, Volume Two.

ART

Richard Artschwager was born in Washington, D.C. in 1923 and lives in New York. Exhibitions of his paintings, sculpture, and drawings have been held at the Kunsthalle Basel, Switzerland, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, and Leo Castelli Gallery, New York.
James Rosenquist was born in 1933 in Grand Forks, North Dakota, and lives in New York and Aripeka, Florida. Major exhibitions of his work have been held recently at the Denver Art Museum, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, and Richard L. Feigen Gallery, Chicago.
Lucas Samaras was born in 1936 in Kastoria, Greece, and lives in New York. His work has been exhibited internationally since the 1960s, including recent shows at the Denver Art Museum, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, and Pace Gallery, New York.

The Paris Review is pleased to announce the following:

- Rick Bass is the winner of a General Electric/CCLM Younger Writers Award for his story, "Where the Sea Used to Be," which appeared in issue 102.
- Alice Munro's story "Circle of Prayer," which appeared in issue 100, has been selected for the 1987 edition of The Best American Short Stories.
- Alice Adams story, "Ocracoke Island," which appeared in issue 102, will be included in the 1987 edition of O. Henry Prize Stories Collection.
- C. K. Williams's "Le Petit Salvie" and Robert Pinsky's "Lament for the Makers" have been selected for the Pushcart Prize Anthology. Both poems appeared in issue 100.

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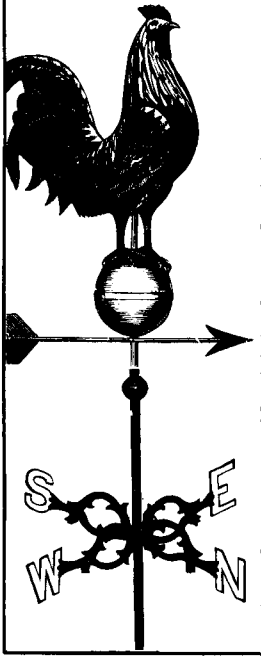
NOTICE

Those who in the spring of 1953 chose to buy the first issue of The Paris Review *paid 75 cents for it. It had 120 pages (including three of advertising) featuring the work of Peter Matthiessen, Terry Southern, George Steiner, and Robert Bly, among others, and an interview on the craft of writing with E. M. Forster. A single copy of that first issue is now worth, I am told, well over $200—thus a financial as well as intellectual investment for those early readers if they thought to keep the issue on their shelves. Since then a number of price hikes have been enacted, largely to keep apace of production and mailing costs. Now, alas, there is another–to six dollars. Actually, the price is not only comparable to those of our literary-magazine brethren, but could be a bargain as well: the present-day issues are over twice as lengthy as the first numbers. An actuarial assessment would suggest that the true cost is about the same as it was. And furthermore, there is always the thought that the worth of the magazine, like that of good wines, is increasing as time goes by. Subscription prices have been raised as well. The practical will note that a subscription saves 20% off the bookstall price. Whichever means one uses to obtain a copy, it should be remembered that if the value of an issue increases as it has in the past, this magazine that you hold in your hand could around the turn of the century be worth $1300. It is doubtful, but on that off-chance I think I'll lay in some myself.*

G.A.P.



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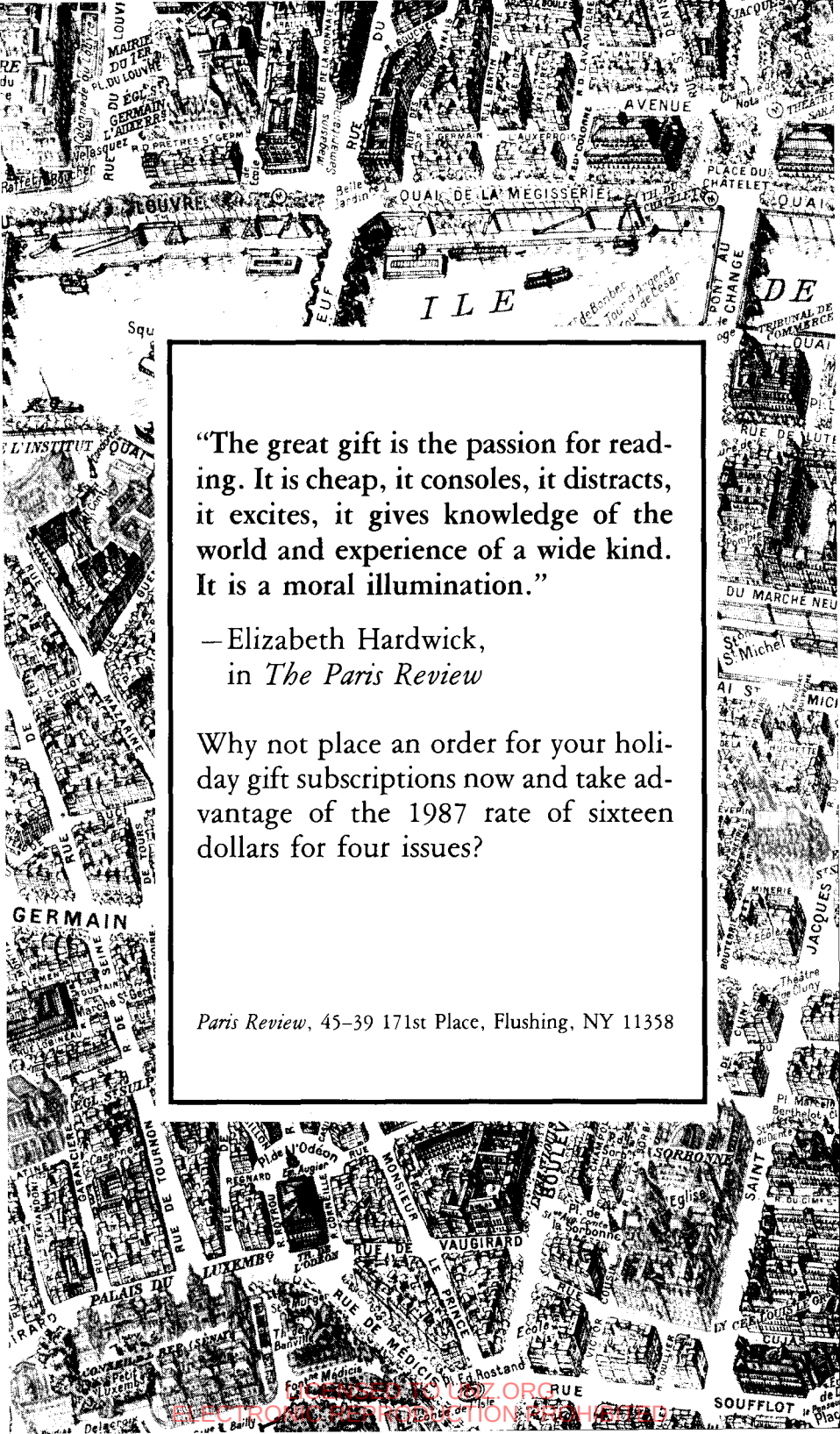
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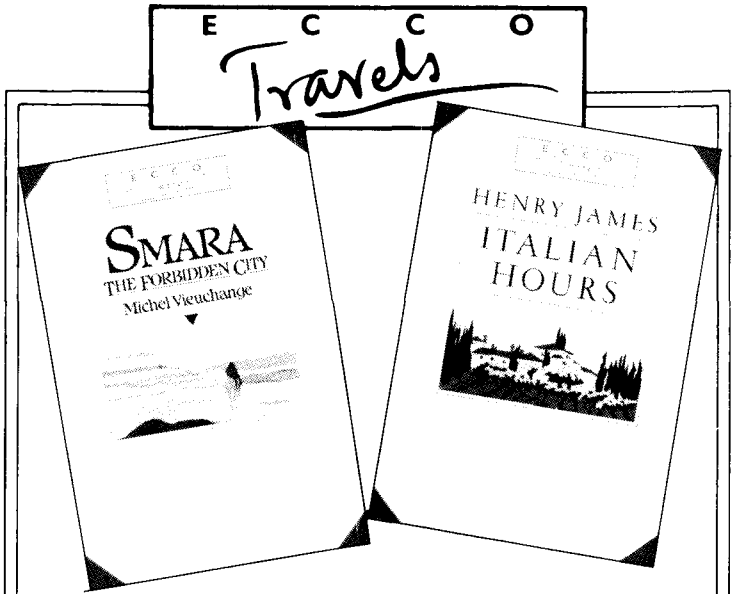

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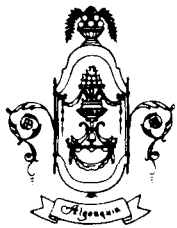

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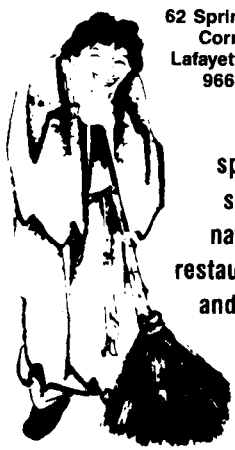

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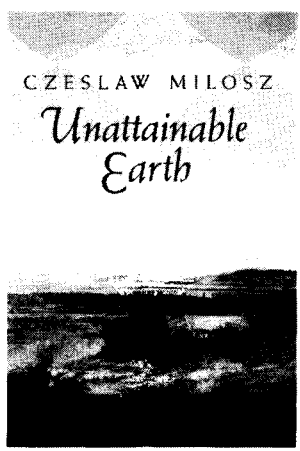

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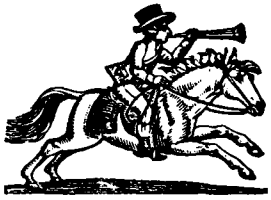

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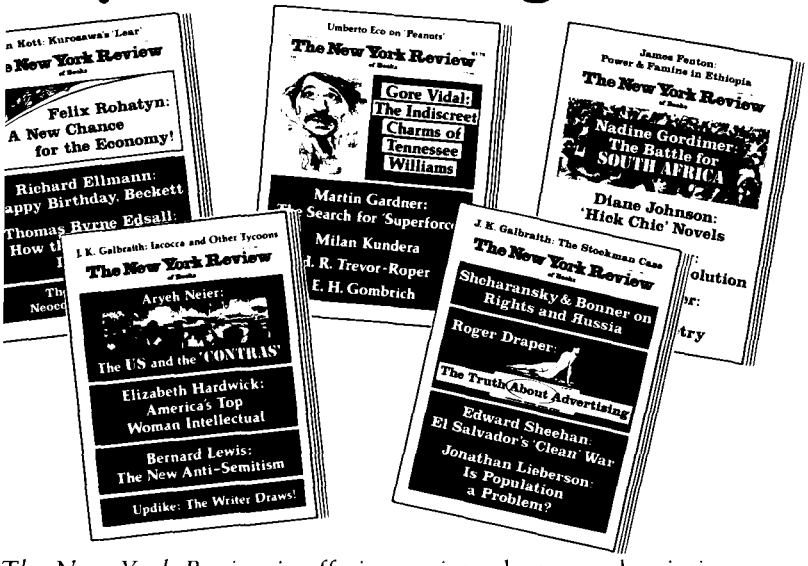
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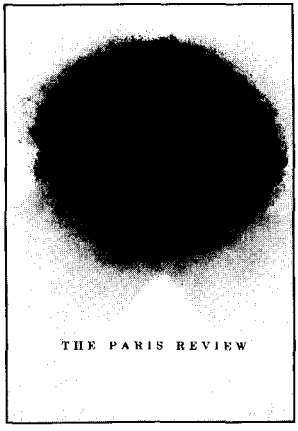

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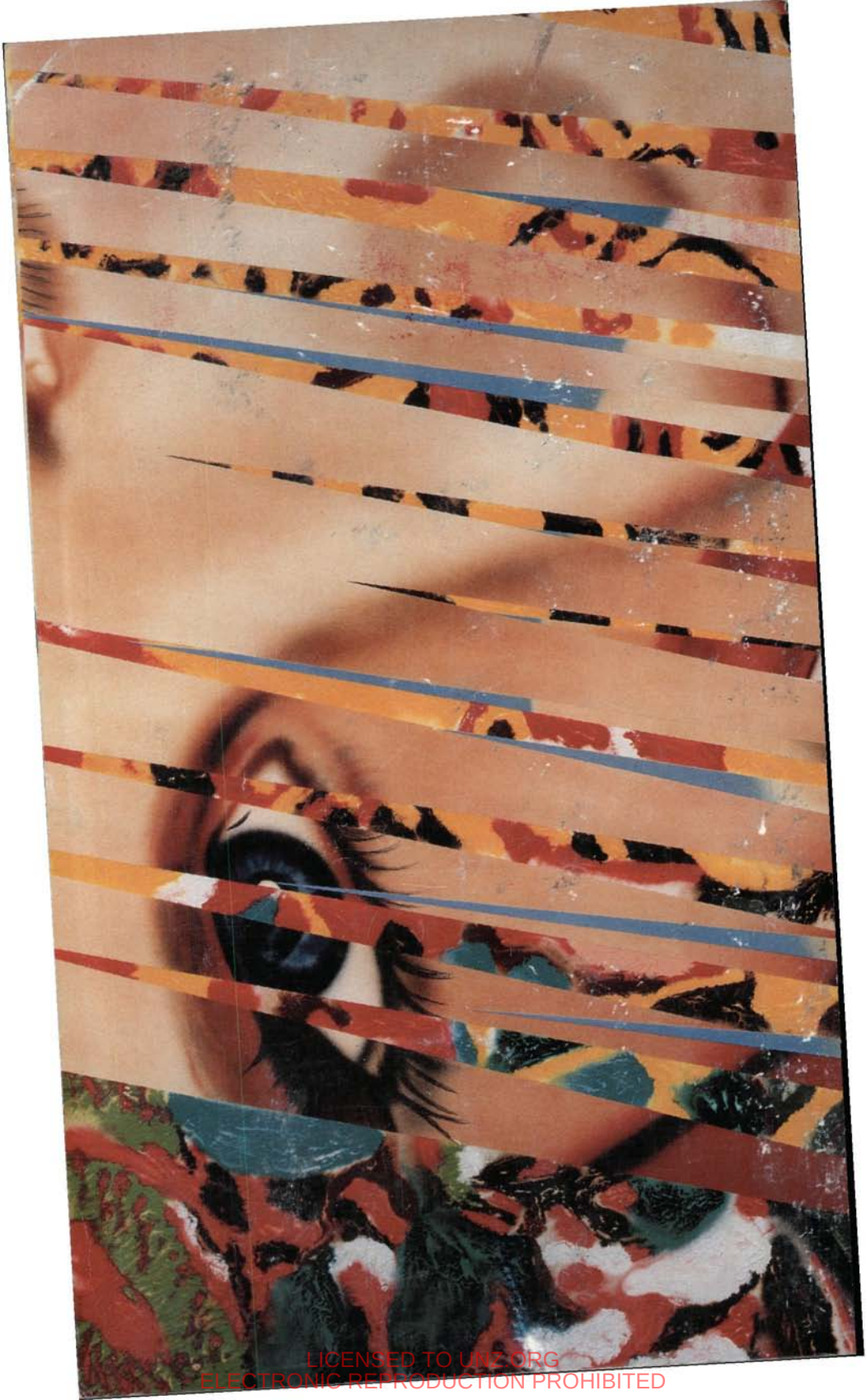

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